Night Stalker

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Night Stalker

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Summary

Hannibal never expected to be courted at all, but to be courted by someone willing to risk the ire of the Chesapeake Ripper by breaking into his home? That was unthinkable. Until it happened.

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Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Prologue ~ Feb 2, 2010

Mrs. Lawson most likely was suffering from postpartum depression, Hannibal mused as he arrived home one evening. He absently considered and dismissed treatment options as he stepped through the front door and dropped his keys on the table. Safe in his own domain he was moving on a form of autopilot. The autopilot switched off when, instead of hearing the usual muffled 'thud' of metal hitting leather, the key ring chimed against the glass of the table top. Hannibal paused and frowned. Someone had been in his house and he did not employ a maid service.

Hannibal forced his expression neutral and glided from room to room, stopping only to 'borrow' a fire poker from the foyer fireplace as he looked for other things out of place. Small signs became apparent; a book leaned the opposite way on a shelf, a stick of charcoal perpendicular to the rest, and the faint scent of lavender permeating the air.

As he stepped into the kitchen, he exchanged the poker for a chef's knife from the butcher block. He left the poker laid across the kitchen island for ease of access later if needed.

Minor inconsistencies with the decor aside, the first floor seemed untouched and the second floor for the most part much the same. However, the rug in the hall was slightly askew with a corner curled under itself, a tripping hazard waiting to happen. He fixed it absently and then crept forward.

When he stepped into his bedroom he paused and let his air of false neutrality evaporate, truly offended for the first time. Baring his teeth as he swept the room with a diagnostic glance he saw that the signs were slight here too, but everywhere. His suits thumbed through, drawers opened and not closed properly, even his linens ruffled. He circled the bed and snarled aloud; someone had been through his bedside table.

There was no denying it, someone had been searching his house...

He checked the bathroom and the same small indications of a search there as well, items placed back in the wrong order.

He made his way to his study to find it untouched, save one out of place book. So... whatever the interest in him ... did not seem to be professional. No, his stalker was obviously more interested in the personal.

Hannibal remained consummately practical, once he was assured he was alone in the house, he returned to the foyer, again exchanging the knife for the poker and returning the former to its proper place. He examined his front door lock and made a mental note to have it replaced. Someone had picked it and left visible damage, and now the faint trace of lavender through the house made sense.

Hannibal stood in the foyer for another moment, mentally debating a plan of action before he decided to return to his room with a black bag and dumped out both of the drawers of his

bedside table. Everything there would have to be replaced. Everything went in the garbage, he couldn't abide the thought of it being handled by a stranger.

He knew that he could replace his intimate possessions easily to reassure himself of their cleanliness. As he sat down, he briefly considered recipes if he ever got his hands on whomever it was, as he tapped away on his tablet, ordering replacements for everything he had just thrown away.

That night, a vague sense of uneasiness accompanied him to his bed. Even the prerequisite fresh linens do little to soothe the sense of being violated. He did not wish to contemplate what his invader may have done near his bed, despite lavender being the only lingering scent in the room.

~*~*~

He pointedly went about his normal routine the next day, and was drawn in to take part in investigating an FBI case. He locked his front door and stared at his house as he sat behind the wheel. The drive to Quantico was littered with several very rude individuals. Hannibal idly made note of the license plate of the person that cut him off in traffic and had decided to include rude gestures while doing so.

Hannibal checked his phone again and sighed, a message from Jack directed him to the forensics lab . He climbed out of his car and paused, casually looking around as the hairs on the back of his neck rose as if he sensed that he was being watched. Hannibal shook his head clear of the lingering paranoia and fixed the collar of his coat as he descended into the bowels of the FBI building.

Hannibal’slip curled after the first breath in the room. He took another to confirm that he recognised the unmistakable scent of lavender. They all smelled faintly of it, it might be any one of them.

Will entered in his usual manner, eyed the body on the table and paused by one of the sinks to wash his hands almost compulsively. Another item on their ever growing list of things to discuss during therapy.

Hannibal stifled most of a twitch as he stepped back to let Will pass him. The soap was lavender scented.

“Why am I here, Jack?” Will asked, gaze skittering to the shrouded body and then away awkwardly.

“I want you to take a look at this. Banker. We got the body after the Baltimore PD found a second body with similar markings. News Anchor. She’ll be arriving in about twenty minutes. The scenes were trampled, but I do have photographs, Will.”

“Anything odd that i need to know before I look?”

“Not that I can think of.” Jack responded, passing over a plain folder. Will flipped it open and immediately went tense. Hannibal stepped closer to Will, ready to offer a word of comfort or

a steadying hand. Will dropped the file on the metal table and started spreading out photographs.

“Is the mutilation pattern repeated on our second body?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see the body?” Will asked. Jack nodded and Zeller pulled back the sheet. Will frowned.

“Why are there squ--” He stopped mid word and tilted his head, “wait, no, why are there cubes of flesh cut out of the thighs?”

“We don’t know, Will. We were hoping your insight might help. Especially now with a second body. There’s more missing there.” Jack said as he crossed over to stand in front of Will.

Hannibal took a breath and nearly choked. Jack smelled strongly of nicotine but even he carried notes of lavender on his skin.

“Same pattern?”

“As you said, cubes of flesh excised from the thighs, stomach, and back. Second victim is also missing her heart.”

“These seem precise, Jack. Carefully chosen, and post mortem. But… I’m not seeing anything else other than an oddity. Maybe when I can see the second body?” Will shrugged. “I’ve got a class. I’ll stop by again after, when you have the second victim, so I can make comparisons.” Jack nodded and Will vanished. Hannibal only blinked when Jack called his name.

“Hannibal? Do you have a moment?”

“Of course, Jack.”

“How is Will? Just the typical six month check.” Jack’s lips twitched slightly, nervously.

“Will is handling his duties well, but gets aggravated when he is pulled in on what he considers… common sense cases. Things he lectures his students on, Jack.”

“We eased him back into profiling…”

“I believe he would prefer to be considered back in the saddle?” Hannibal offered.

“So I should quit giving him easy cases and let him just do his damn job?”

Hannibal smirked, “Precisely, Jack. He still maintains his appointments, now twice a week.”

“Thank you, Doctor Lecter.”

“You are welcome, Agent Crawford. I have patients today, so I will say goodbye for now.”

~*~*~

Hannibal arrived home in his Bentley and surveyed the house from the driver’s seat. He eyed the carefully wrapped package sitting next to him in the passenger seat. Someone had left him something. He hadn’t opened it yet, after he had determined nothing was… volatile. There were packages he had ordered express sitting on the stoop, clad in brown paper. He smirked slightly, at least his suppliers are quick.

The keys thudded as they were supposed to on dropping them, he still surveyed his surroundings carefully as he moved into the kitchen and then stopped abruptly.

A single red rose had been carefully placed in a crystal vase on his kitchen island.

Hannibal set the packages aside and circled the island. Of the vase he noted it was crystal. a common shape, and rather... unremarkable. But the rose gave him pause.

As he walked away from it, he picked up his tablet. A quick photograph later, he was running a search. Once he was sure, he set the tablet aside and made a note to call around to various florists in the area in the morning to see which had stock of that particular breed of flower.

Hannibal prowled through his home again. Only the rose was new. Circling back to the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator and froze. There, still vacuum sealed was a cut of red meat with a typed note that simply said, ‘*for you’*

Hannibal closed the fridge and went on another walk through, this time checking everything more closely. The trap door was undisturbed, what lay below also undisturbed. He twitched convulsively. Whomever it was had come back. And apparently was trying to feed him. Hannibal bared his teeth. Leaving the food untouched, he fixed himself something from his own stores.

As he ate he contemplated the fact that, twice now, he’d had someone walking through his home with impunity. That they had also accessed his car with the same disregard for his privacy. Hannibal growled low in his throat. Whomever they were, they seemed more than simply interested in him. He used a scalpel to open the plain package that he’d brought in from the car. He paused and blinked. It was a wooden box with a card for a local antique dealer affixed to the lid.

Hannibal opened the box and peered it, flinching for a moment before he poked gently with the butt of the scalpel. There was no give in the shape of the human heart nestled within the wood shavings of the box.

With careful fingers he lifted the model heart out, and admired the work. French, late nineteenth century. He set the model on his kitchen island and stared at it for a few moments, considering the implications of his situation.

Night fell and Hannibal was still preoccupied and wary of sleeping in the home he was now painfully aware was no longer secure.

When he woke the next morning, he opened the refrigerator and hissed. Another note rested on the shelf.

it is a gift, or would you prefer another cut?

In his house, while he slept. Rage roiled below his calm facade. Below the note, on another shelf, in one of his own dishes are neatly packaged sausage links, with the mark of a well known, quality, local butcher.

Hannibal just stared for several seconds. Someone was letting themselves in, they were clever and careful enough not to wake him, and were trying to reassure him that they weren't a threat. Hannibal took the dish of sausages and sniffed at it, slightly disappointed to catch nothing but the meat and the spices. He knew this butcher... had used him when he first arrived in Baltimore, and rated the quality of his meat insofar as anything he hadn't caught and butchered himself could be considered good quality

He made himself breakfast, using the sausage, and returned the remainder to the refrigerator. The taste was unusual for sausage meat and it took him a few seconds to place as venison. It was different than his usual fare, but did not taste of fear, though it was a bit stronger in flavor. He finished his meal and spent some time on his latest artwork before leaving for the day.

When he opened the front door, he let his gaze take in the grounds, although he didn't slow his usual pace. He could feel eyes on him and showing no fear was of paramount importance. His mobile rang, and he paused between house and car and answered.

"Hello Jack. Yes, I'll meet you. Good morning."

Hannibal drove to the crime scene and took note of Will's car already there as he stepped under the tape to stare at yet another corpse.

There is a rose in the body's chest cavity. And cameras. Will stood in a corner, staring down at the body. Hannibal knew that expression so he observed and waited until Will blinked and shifted. Hannibal breathed in and was assaulted again by the scent of lavender.

"Will?"

"Sorry, Jack. It's just... I was in here last week. Ordered a set of sunflowers for Alana." Will mused and Jack nodded as he waited for more, Will didn't disappoint,"So... our florist saw something, he's missing his eyes, Jack. And it's the same killer as our last victims, but... heart's missing."

"He saw something... Gang related if they took the eyes?" Jack speculated. Hannibal noticed the way Will's eye twitched. He made mental note of it, to discuss with Will during his next appointment.

"Maybe. Has the coroner been yet?" Will asked.

"Do you see any of ours, Will?" Jack asked.

"Sorry, a bit distracted, Jack. Have the locals taken liver temperature yet?" Will asked, eyeing the rose that seemed to grow out of the gaping hole where the man's heart should have been.

"No. They held it for us."

"Liver temp will give us an idea of when to go through the tapes." Will said, nodding at the camera on the wall.

Hannibal stepped closer to Will and cleared his throat quietly.

"You seem quite absorbed by this one, Will."

"Trying to figure out what a banker, a news anchor, and a florist all have in common for this one... and the rose is...." Will trailed off and shrugged.

"Something about the rose troubles you?"

"Red roses are passion, love, and devotion, Hannibal. Just like sunflowers are friendly."

"These are crimes of passion... Are the victims the target of said passion or the messenger dove for it?"

"Dove is peace, Hannibal... this... wasn't peaceful. This one feels... almost opportunistic." Will eased into a crouch, elbows placed on his knees, gloved hands dangling in front of him.

"How so?"

Will just stared, eyes slightly unfocused for a few moments before he stood robotically and began to move as he spoke. "I enter through the back, sweep his legs from under him, the fall takes down this glass display, he tries to run, I pounce on him, take up a glass shard and cut his throat. It isn't enough, I have a message to send. I straddle him and tear and yank out his eyes with my bare hands, and then... cut out his heart?" Will blinked and shook himself.

"Will?" Jack prompted.

"Something's missing here. It... it's not.... Oh..." he examined the body for a moment before he realised the heart was still there.

"Will?"

"He was interrupted. Eyes are there, heart is… huh, I don't think he meant to impale it on glass? Has anyone called his assistant?"

Hannibal glanced at a passing agent with questioning eyes and she shrugged.

"The florists assistant, has anyone reached out?"

Will got to his feet and stepped around the remains of the glass counter, ignoring the crunch under his shoes. His gloved hands drifted past the point of sale and down to a notepad tucked next to the phone.

Will blinked once, twice, and then glanced down at the yellow markers.

"You have this already?"

"Yeah?"

Will picked up a spiral bound notebook and flipped to the very front, then a few pages down. He pulled out his cellphone and entered in the number.

Everyone paused when a cell phone began ringing inside the shop.

"What...?" Someone asked, head tilted towards the sound

"Find it!" Jack barked. Will was already moving through the others. He paused and then sighed, dropping into a crouch and fishing out a ringing cell phone before freezing.

"Jack.... going to need the photographer over here, now."

"What is it?"

"Photographer... I need this taken down in sections, all documented, and we're going to need another bag. He wasn't the target. She was."

"The assistant?" Another agent asked. Will nodded shortly.

"What..." Jack asked, stepping closer.

Will stepped back from what Hannibal had mistakenly thought was a display of roses and just gestured.

"Excuse me." Will murmured before he turned and walked out of the florist's shop. He made it down the alley and around the corner before fishing out an air sick bag, shaking it out and throwing up. He sagged against the brickwork for a second, trying to moderate his breathing.

Hannibal followed at a respectable distance, Will didn't usually slip out of crime scenes to vomit and considering some of the scenes he had seen Hannibal couldn't understand what it was about this one that had upset him so thoroughly.

"Will?"

"He... wrapped her in that green florist's tape and... I bet, when we pull the roses out, they are all sharp, and I bet... she was still breathing when he started."

"You think she was tortured to death?"

"Hannibal, the foam? That's green, usually." Will said quietly. Hannibal thought for a moment and swallowed. Ah.

"You think it was used to absorb most of the blood?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" Will managed, bag clutched lightly in a fist.

“What do you think of this one, anything more Uncle Jack should know?"

"I think.... some of those roses might not be originally red? And that's making me sick. Ever do the experiment in grade school with flowers and food colouring?"

"Ah, yes, of course." Hannibal answered with a noncommittal gesture. "But that would indicate that the flowers had been sat there in blood for some time."

"That's what I'm worried about. We had marks and plant matter on the banker and the news anchor. Those cuts we couldn't explain that didn't fit the pattern I saw. Now... I think I am, and..."

"And?" Hannibal prompted quietly, waiting to see what Will was going to say next.

"I think she was the culmination. We were missing blood and cubes of flesh and muscle from the other two...."

"She was his..."

"The one he actually wanted. The Florist was... collateral damage, maybe, or maybe he thought the florist was in love with her too."

"And the motive?”

"He wanted to show her he loved her. Using flowers. He was jealous of the florist. Tried to tear out his heart, and took his eyes..."

"We most likely have him on camera, or he's in their records, Hannibal. He... oh... that's how they are connected. The banker probably handled this florist's account. I saw a news piece on this shop, it's why I got the sunflowers for Alana from here..."

"Any advertising is good advertising?" Hannibal asked

Will made a noise and then walked over to a public trash can and dropped his bag in. "Hannibal? A lot of those roses are going to show signs of rooting."

Hannibal pulled a face and nodded slightly.

"I will warn Jack, if you need a moment?"

"Just need to rinse out my mouth, and... they're going to need that notebook I handled. it's got passwords and the like."

Will nodded to Zeller as he climbed out of the van. Price slid out and rolled his shoulders.

"Hello Doctor Lecter."

“Mr. Price, Ms. Katz, Zeller." Hannibal greeted politely, one hand resting lightly on Will's shoulder as he eyed the front of the florist's shop, the younger man swaying slightly.

"Will okay?" Jimmy asked, scanning over Will’s pale face.

"Just mild shock."

"If you say so doc, it that bad in there?"

When Jack appeared and gestured towards the shop, Will just shook his head. "Jack, he's either on the tapes or in the records. Thank you, but I'm not looking at that again."

"Will..." Jack tried and Will actually growled.

"I said I'm not looking at it again. I'll write it up for you but I'm not ready to talk about it right now."

Jack opened his mouth and closed it as if he had a mind to argue.

“You promised me Jack, I'll talk when I'm ready. I’m not ready.” Will said, tone almost threatening

"Doctor Lecter?"

"Agent Crawford?" Hannibal's tone was different and Will glanced at the psychiatrist for a moment before he stepped away and walked over to his car, fishing out a plastic bottle of water.

"Did..."

"I am uncertain as to why, but this one... rattled our Will."

"I could smell more blood than I saw, Jack. It was... bothering me. And then... that." he said and put the bottle to his mouth.

~*~*~

It took them a week to catch the killer, who turned out to be a high school acquaintance of the shop assistant.

Will spent the week splitting time between teaching and helping piece together the rest of the profile.

Hannibal let himself into his house and paused. Lavender permeated the air again along with another distinctly floral scent.

He sighed and picked up the poker again, then paused in the living room. A delicate white orchid in a glazed black ceramic pot and another typed note stared at him from the table, the note, leaned against a long flat box in flat white paper.

while i do not want to suggest i see you as delicate, the rest of the sentiments remain.

Hannibal circled the orchid, examining the pot for any clues, before he carried it into his dining room and took the time to go through the house again, marginally less aggravated than the last time he had found a flower in his home. Nothing else seemed to be handled or moved, until he came to his bedroom door.

He found another typed note, taped to his bedroom door and just glared for several seconds.

i find myself wondering about your face in sleep. rest well.

Hannibal opened the door, and looked and paced. Nothing had been touched. Apparently his... admirer? Had learned boundaries? Had they seen him dispose of his possessions and felt a twinge of guilt, perhaps?

Descending back down the stairs, he sighed when he opened his refrigerator. There, wrapped in familiar brown waxed paper, was a sheep's heart and another package of liver, with a small red paper heart attached. Hannibal blinked. Apparently his admirer was celebrating Valentines… by leaving him several gifts.

Preparing himself a simple meal from the heart, he admired the orchid as he ate and kept darting glances at the wrapped package near his elbow. Once the dishes were washed and put away, Hannibal opened the package.

A delicate pocket square in a deep red paisley pattern, along with a matching tie lay within the stark white tissue paper. Another note was included.

because we are not ready yet to meet face to face, accept this as a token of my desire

Hannibal peered at the pattern for a moment and noticed little skulls woven into the fine silk. Hannibal felt his mouth twitch in amusement. His Admirer also seemed to have a tasteful sense of humor.

He left the door open a crack when he went to sleep that night, and lay there, staring at it, scalpel and pencil resting in easy reach atop his current sketchbook on his bedside table. He was more than aware how quickly admirers could turn to attackers and this one had repeatedly broken through the best locks money could buy. They may not have tried to harm him thus far, but he was not going to take any chances.

Chapter One ~ February 15, 2010

The next morning Hannibal stepped into his kitchen and paused. Taped to the fridge door was a small scrap of paper, the same typeface he now recognized easily.

thank you, enjoy?

He twitched and then opened the door to find a carton of eggs and another wrapped brown paper package on the shelf.He carried both to the counter and opened the carton, frowning when he found duck eggs and sliced ham, the brown paper carrying the same familiar butcher's mark as before.

Whoever was leaving the food was going out of their way to make sure it was only the best, that thought pleased him as he made himself breakfast. sautéing red peppers and some onion to add to his usual protein scramble. He frowned slightly, looking back at the note.

Hannibal felt gooseflesh break out on his arms as he made a small humming noise. The sudden thought that he had been asleep when it was left making him shiver slightly.

"Very well then, apparently, you haven't learned boundaries... or you interpret them... differently."

He sat down to his meal, about to begin, and scowled when his cell phone chimed.

"Good morning Jack.” He feigned a relaxed tone, “I understand, and I can pick up Will before arriving... yes, very well."

Hannibal glared at the phone for a moment,Jack hadn’t even bothered to say good morning, or good bye.

If Jack were not so highly placed, or useful to Hannibal personally, he would have been consumed many moons ago.

He ate his meal, washed the dishes, and then headed out to pick up Will on his way. Even though it truly was not. Yet, Jack wanted him to accompany Will, and as his vehicle was out of order at the moment, Hannibal had agreed to play chauffeur.

When he arrived, Will was sitting on his front porch with one of the dogs lying at his feet. They made quite the idyllic little scene. Hannibal slid out of the car and started walking over to Will, but paused at a faint quacking noise.

"Will?" he asked, glancing around for the noise.

"Neighbor down the way has ducks. Max brought me one the other day, still alive. It apparently made a nest on my roof. No eggs yet."

"Duck eggs..." Hannibal murmured quietly to himself as he feigned a charmed smile, metally stored the information for later consideration as he smoothed down his new red tie. Will's eyes didn't linger on the movement.

"I'm kind of hoping it doesn't lay eggs? Because baby ducks tumbling off the roof? No thank you." Will shudder was almost theatrical.

"Of course, perhaps you can move the nest somewhere safer?"

"Yeah, I'm planning on catching it, once the car is fixed." He said nodding at the vehicle. "I must have picked up a nail, ended up with a flat. Thank you, I know Jack asked."

"Jack does not ask," Hannibal pointed out and Will snorted.

"Ok, demanded. Thanks anyway, I appreciate it."

"You are welcome, shall we?"

"Give me a second to lock up the house, though... I would pity somebody trying to walk in with Max in the house... death by licking." Will joked with a fond smile.

Hannibal let an affectionate smile flicker on his lips as he waited for Will to lock up.

Will slid into the passenger seat, bag neatly tucked next to his feet. Hannibal just eyed the duck as it waddled in front of the car.

"It's going back to the neighbors as soon as I get a box and the car fixed."

Hannibal blinked and nodded as it crossed to relative safety and he started his car.

"Did Jack tell you anything more?"

"No, just that we had something he wanted me to take a look at, and apparently you to... babysit me on."

"You do not require a babysitter, Will."

"Ok, someone to monitor my reactions..." Will huffed. "Same thing. He thinks I'm... What did you call it? A fragile little teacup."

"I am merely there at Jack's request. I was only given a location and told to collect you."

"Then you got more information than I did. I was told we had something, and you'd be by to get me."

"How did Jack know about your vehicle?"

"Found out about it, last night when I pulled in at the station. I was planning on getting it fixed... but Jack says 'jump'..."

"and we all ask how high." Hannibal answered and Will let out another annoyed huff.

Will rubbed a hand over his face even as he made an agreeing noise.

"How have you been sleeping, Will?" Hannibal asked, one eye still on the road.

"No better or worse than usual. Yourself?"

"As expected," Hannibal gave a none answer, "and your diet, have you been eating well?"

"Can we not analyze me while you're driving, please? Just once?"

"I was... as you wish. How is your pack?"

"Ellie has an ear infection, she's been sleeping next to my bed the past few days, she's getting better... Buster keeps inviting her to play."

"I presume Buster means well?"

"Yeah, she's just not in the mood, you know?"

"Rather like her owner, I would wager."

Will shot him a look and Hannibal made a soft humming noise.

"Doesn't this disrupt... well... everything you do?"

"It is a Monday, Will. I don't have patients scheduled today. So, Jack told us to jump."

"Oh. Should I start asking about the weather?"

"Do you wish to?" Hannibal asked, raising his brows. Will smirked slightly.

"I wasn't expecting that to actually get a response."

"It would have been rude not to respond at all, as it is, the weather is entirely unremarkable right now, wouldn't you say?" Hannibal answered amusedly.

Will chuckled. "I would argue we could do with some moisture, but it's been a normal spring, so far."

"True. You said your neighbor raises ducks?"

"Yes, raises them to eat, from eggs all the way to eating full grown adults. I think he also sells the feathers?"

"Does he ever sell the birds?" Hannibal asked, curious.

"I'm sure you could buy whole birds. The one I've got right now is an escapee. He's five miles back in the woods, I'm surprised one made it so far without a fox eating it."

"Quite the determined little duckling," Hannibal mused and Will tittered at his phrasing.

"Yes. And it's trying to nest on my roof. Slightly insane, perhaps? Especially with seven dogs waiting for it down here."

"Perhaps." Hannibal agreed, slowing as the sight of a VSP SUV sitting off the side of the road with an officer leaning against the hood. Will rolled down his window.

"You boys with the FBI?" The VSP officer eyed Hannibal critically, apparently not sure what to think of dark overcoat, black suit, and the red paisley tie.He looked more like he was dressed for the opera than a crime scene.

"Yes, officer. Will Graham and my associate, Doctor Hannibal Lecter." Will replied and gestured between himself and Hannibal as he spoke

"Son, bit late to be bringing a a doctor. It's a mess up there."

"Usually is, when Jack calls me in. Should we park and hike in?"

"Might be a good idea, we did get a car stuck about a mile up. SUV or better for that track."

"Thank you." Will said. Hannibal parked his vehicle several yards away from the turn off and grimaced, looking down at his shoes.

"I suppose that is why you are wearing hiking boots?" Hannibal asked, expression upturned with mild distaste.

"Jack didn't warn you?"

"Obviously not."

"Send him the cleaning bill then." Will said with a shrug and set off. "And the one for the inevitable mud on your trousers as well." He added. "Come on."

Hannibal growled softly but followed. Will cursed and slid a bit.

"I thought you said we could use the moisture?" Hannibal quipped, offering a steadying hand.

"Up where I am? Yeah, we could use a bit more rain, this? This looks like something broke and flooded the damn road and ditch. Don't wanna risk walking the ditch, because that's probably three feet of standing water down there, so if you slide into that, it'll be... a mess getting back out."

"Why do you say flooded?"

"Around here, it takes quite a bit to soak the ground like this. Doesn't seem natural either. Not when you consider we had heavy snow early in the year but have hit a warmer spell that melted it all. But it rained pretty badly in the last few days. If that's the case? Scene may be... altered by the water."

Hannibal paused.

"You hesitated?"

"Have you ever seen a waterlogged corpse? I've seen hardened agents lose their dinner just at the sight of it."

"I am sure I can manage."

"Well, I am carrying a few sick bags, just in case."

"Where did those come from, Will?" Hannibal's tone was equal parts curiosity and concern.

"Amazon. Beverly started carrying them, gave me the link and the idea."

"Vomiting at crime scenes is more common for you than you have indicated before."

"It's hardly good form is it?" Will said, answering the unspoken accusation, "Main profiler can't hold his stomach. At least it saves me from contaminating anything."

"One could consider that a benefit?" Hannibal responded.

"I'm fine when I'm in the killer's head, Hannibal, it's resurfacing that is... jarring and has been making me throw up."

"How recently has this been an issue?"

"In the last few months. I'm handling it, it's not impacting me too badly, and I even have snacks in my bag, just in case."

"I have seen what you call, 'snacks', Will." Hannibal told him disapprovingly and Will waved him off.

Will knew they were getting closer when a VSP officer sprinted past him and abruptly lost his stomach contents. He caught sight of Hannibal grimacing slightly and silently passed him a blue air sick bag before slipping under the yellow tape.

Jack was a little pale, ashy in tone, and swallowing hard. Will made note of it and just raised an eyebrow, adjusting his glasses. If Jack was showing the signs of it then this had to be a nasty scene.

"That bad?" He asked and noted Jack's pursed lips as he nodded.

"Three agents puked so far and honestly I nearly did too." Jack admitted. "In and out, not expecting much given the level of bloating from the water. Just give us what you can."

Will followed the pointing finger with his gaze and then walked down the track, hearing Hannibal slide a bit as he worked his way to the bottom of a small incline. He splashed as he stepped through a puddle, gaze dropping to it for a moment. He dug into his bag and fished a clear jar and lid free, scoops a critter into the jar and labels the tape carefully before tucking it back into his bag.

"Will?"

"Larva. I won't tell you from what right now." He lifted his voice, "Has anybody gone to the left of here yet?"

"No? Why?"

"Insects are pretty thick to the left, but not to the right."

"All right, I'll have somebody check it out." Jack groused. Will lifted a hand to show he'd heard before he ducked under yet another chunk of tape.

"Hey Will."

"Bev. Guess you had to push it back?"

"Yeah, gum?"

"Thanks. That bad?"

Beverly waited for Will to pop the gum in his mouth and start chewing before she gestured.

A face peered out from the water, eyes cast over and cloudy, filmed and unseeing.

Will squinted and gestured to his throat. "Dump site?"

Will ignored a choked noise and the sound of panicked scrambling, forcing himself to watch as a fish poked out of the corpse's mouth. Light glinted oddly and he lowered himself to a crouch.

"It's an old mill pond." Beverly answered, not giving him an indication one way or another.

"Logging road, trees are maple. And you've got deer trails that seem to avoid this area. Even with water here… How many bodies?"

"Found at least five, partials too. So we don't know entirely yet."

"Anything at least semi-workable?"

Beverly grimaced as somebody else gagged but then seemed to recover. "Katz! We've got... holy... at least eight more... up the hill, half in the hill." Price called. Will turned towards Price's voice and started climbing the hill, eyeing the insect activity as he passed.

"More than that, Jimmy. Have you looked under your feet?"

Will stopped half-way up the hill and stepped carefully to the side, holding up a warding hand for anybody else trying to walk either down to him for following his exact path.

"What do you have, Will?"

"Lower jaw, small. Female or child, and... yeah, this entire hillside is crawling with insect predation, boys and girls."

"Child killer?" Hannibal asked from behind him and Will jumped.

"Looks like." Will muttered darkly. "Good job you're here, I don't want to get into this sicko's head."

"May I?"

"This entire hillside is going to have to be done systematically. I think... Hannibal? I think what they found down in the pond? It's a washout." Will turned, heard a faint crunching noise and looked down. He swallowed once and carefully reached back to find Hannibal. His hand linked with Hannibal's for a moment.

"Down the way we came. Now. This entire hillside is... down."

Only once they are both back by Jack did Will meet his gaze.

"Won't do this one, Jack. That entire hillside is alive with insects. Very small bones, broke a skull by stepping on it, there are teeth and finger or toe bones everywhere. That's a mass dumping ground of one sort or another. Fresher bodies are in the pond at first guess, disturbed soil washed out, bodies moved, ended up in the pond."

"But..."

"I'm going to go talk to one of the local State Police, see how badly it's been raining out here recently. It's too scattered right now, Jack."

~*~*~

Hannibal brought him to Quantico. And he just stared when Beverly showed up an hour later and tried to hand him a hard case full of jars.

"I pretty much begged jerky from half the Virginia State Police. Every critter has some form of food, Will."

"And then she made me stop at a gas station and went in and bought at least four more bags." Zeller grumbled.

"You have my work, Beverly. You don't really need me for..."

"You wrote the handbook, Will. I'd rather see them looked after and recorded correctly. When we catch this guy, I don't want his attorneys to have any wiggle room."

"Then do it yourself, and save me, so the prosecution can call me in as the expert witness." He suggested and Bev fixed him with an annoyed look at the use of logic.

"Does a Slim Jim count as food?" Zeller asked.

"No." was Hannibal's response.

"For helping to establish a life cycle, and therefore potential time of death? Yes." Will argued.

"Oh, then you ought to have phrased the question more specifically, edible? barely. Justifiably called food? Never."

"Doctor Lecter, we are all aware of your... preferences in food." Beverly said with a soft smile.

"High brow." Zeller quipped.

"Nothing wrong with that, Zee." Will argued, "Some of us just like hamburger meat or hot dogs. Others... well... tastes are different."

"Yes," Hannibal agreed, "very different." He said with a knowing smirk.

~*~*~

That evening, Hannibal found himself mildly disappointed that nothing had been altered about his home. He still kept a scalpel by his bed. When he woke in the morning, he was almost eager, heading down the stairs. Like a child at christmas.

A note waited on his refrigerator.

good morning, i trust you slept well. enjoy

Hannibal eyed the brown wax paper wrapped packages. Different butcher this time. He examined it all, doing a quick search on the label from his tablet.

He frowned at the fact the meat had been brought in from DC; according to it's wrappings. He also noticed handwriting and eyed it avidly before glancing back at the website he found and sighed. More than likely, not his admirer’s then.

He reached for a cast iron skillet, oil, a lime, parsley, oregano, plucked mint from his windowsill herb garden, and garlic cloves from the pantry. He cooked the remainder of the duck eggs and began to pan cook the lovely steak that was left for him. Once it was all plated, he carried the simple chimichurri steak and eggs to the table and savored every bite.

He took care of the dishes and then checked over his datebook, idly noticing that he has a full slate for the day and that he had a standing lunch date with Alana. The time until he was sat down across from Alana passed quickly. He smiled lightly.

"You seem... happy or happier, Hannibal."

"Do I?" he asked, feigning an innocent expression.

"Yes... There's a... Lightness about you?"

Hannibal thought about it and considered... he had an admirer breaking into his home routinely for almost a month to leave him gifts of food and flowers. He would say that 'something' had happened, but his admirer seemed content to prowl... and watch him sleep.

He had yet to be awakened by his night time visitor, but ever since the note on his bedroom door, he made a point to leave it open just a crack every night.

"I... May have developed a new interest... Or more accurately, a new interest has found me."

"Oh?"

"Something of a secret admirer. They will show themselves in time." Hannibal let his lips curve up as the waiter stepped over and took their orders.

Alana blinked, surprise evident.

"I... Well, I would say it is about time but... Well, it is you, Hannibal." Hannibal raised his brows and waited for Alana to elaborate.

"You... I don't mean to be indelicate Hannibal, but I always assumed you were a confirmed bachelor."

Hannibal smirked, rumors about his sexuality, or lack thereof, had followed him through Johns Hopkins including the ones that thought he had been with Alana herself.

"I am... being courted. Small gifts. My admirer leaves them where I will find them. I find it... intriguing."

Alana eyed him for a moment and grinned at the smile playing on his lips.

"You like them!"

"I know nothing about them, though I grant you, I am enjoying the novelty of being the focus of someone's romantic attention."

She fixed him with a knowing look.

"You and I both know that's not a novelty for you, Hannibal."

"No, unfortunately, it is not. The novelty is in my being completely mystified as to who my admirer is."

"You always could tell when we were in college..."

"You were hardly subtle, Alana." Hannibal said with a teasing smile and she blushed and glared at him.

"I was young, it was a crush." She defended with a scowl and Hannibal smiled.

"And I not much older, but old enough to see it at the time."

"But... you really don't know who it is?"

"No. They know my food and drink preferences well enough, and I found a lovely tie waiting on my desk this morning." Hannibal fingered the one around his neck, a soft flower pattern in

purples that contrasted well against the blue of his shirt. Alana did not have to know it was his desk in his study, and not the one at the office.

"Sending you gifts at work, your secretary must be curious?"

"My secretary has better manners than to ask." Hannibal said pointedly.

"But... she could at least tell you which delivery service is dropping things off?"

"I haven't asked, I am content to wait for this admirer to show themselves in their own time."

"You are enjoying the mystery of it? Are you... worried it might be a patient?"

"Not particularly, if they are they will have a referral when they reveal themselves of course but otherwise I see no harm in it."

"No harm? Don't you worry they might be someone you're entirely unattracted to? The wrong gender, maybe?" Alana asked, gaze curious.

Hannibal dipped his head and refrained from answering as the wait staff set down their plates.

He cut into the quail on his plate and gave a small smile at the taste.

"The food is excellent." He said and Alana nodded.

"Don't deflect Hannibal, you're better than that."

"Gender is not a consideration for me, Alana."

"Oh?"

Hannibal blinked. "Have I managed to surprise you, Doctor Bloom?"

"A little, I mean... There were rumours."

"Idle gossip. Regardless of gender I assure you any partners I may or may not have had would never be so uncouth as to brag about it and I pay them the same courtesy."

"I think I judged you on old world presentation and manners, Hannibal."

"You are now re-evaluating what you think of me, Alana?"

"Just taking note of a new facet."

"Oh?"

"You always seemed a little old fashioned, I suppose I assumed you were either in denial or unwilling to explore things like that."

"Internalized shame is a terrible thing Alana, I have no time for it in my own life. Though I am now concerned I gave you the impression that I am some kind of bigot?"

"No... Of course not!" Alana assured, "Just... A bit prudish about certain things?"

"Simply well mannered enough not to discuss such things openly."

"So, if your admirer turns out to be male?"

"Then they are male. I shall see when they reveal themselves."

"Does it make you nervous? You've repositioned your knife twice, Hannibal."

"I rarely discuss these things with anyone but my own psychiatrist, Alana, and certainly not over dinner." Hannibal answered through gritted teeth. Her line of questioning had gone from reasonable to repetitive, invasive, and irritating very quickly.

"I'm sorry, Hannibal... but... a secret admirer... it's just... sweet ...in a way."

Hannibal felt his eye twitch. Though, he rationalized, if one thought all his gifts had come via his office, sweet was a word that could be applied. Perhaps.

"Hmm... I suppose so." He answered absently.

"It suits you somehow. An old fashioned courtship."

"How have you been, Alana?" Hannibal asked abruptly and Alana smiled knowingly.

"My patients are being predictable. I managed to talk to Will for about ten minutes this morning between his classes. He seems... tired?"

"Tired?"

"Yes. As though he's having trouble sleeping, but also seemed... I would almost call it over caffeinated? Have you ever been trapped in a car with Will when he's had too much coffee?"

"Perhaps he is, many people self medicate with caffeine when lacking sleep."

"Yes but he's.. Twitchy."

"How so?"

"Was muttering about bugs and had a rather nasty bruise on one hand... said it was from a duck? Do you know if he's.... seeing someone?"

"Why do you ask?"

"The duck seems a bit, far fetched?"

"Not at all... He happened to tell me that one of his neighbours lost one that decided to nest on his roof."

"And you believe that?"

"I was at his home, I saw it myself."

"You... House call?"

"If it were I would not have told you of it. Confidentiality Alana." Hannibal chastised her slightly. "He had a flat tyre and urgent business with Jack."

"Oh. Then apparently the duck attacked him and bit him. I was... concerned, Hannibal."

"How so?"

"For a bit here, he's seemed... happy. I thought, perhaps he was in a relationship. But he's as private as you are about such things, so purely speculation."

"You were... concerned about domestic violence?"

"I'm not sure... I know less about wWill's love life than I did about yours an hour ago. In my defence, It did fit."

"Will fishes and fixes engines for fun Alana, those pastimes alone are likely to cause bruising."

"Not like that Hannibal, he couldn't make a decent fist, believe me, I made him try."

"Of course you did. And you presumed that someone had harmed him?"

"Will... He's... I think he makes himself seem very soft for a reason, he knows most people are afraid of him and what he can do. It isn't such a bad leap of logic to assume he wouldn't fight back if assaulted."

"Alana, Will is an ex-police officer."

"Yeah, ex, Hannibal, someone stabbed him and he didn't even go for his gun."

"It bit him badly enough that he cannot make a fist?"

"He promised me it was returned to the neighbor with only feathers ruffled. He returned it alive, Hannibal. I really do worry about him, at times."

"Will has a soft spot for animals, surely you noticed the seven clues to that fact living in his home?"

"Yes, but... I honestly thought..."

"You thought Will would let a partner...." Hannibal trailed off and just held up a hand, "Forgive me, I should know better than to speculate. He is not... how do they say... a dish mat for anyone to walk on him, Alana."

"A doormat, Hannibal, and don't play the "don't speak English" card with me, I've seen you lecturing medical students." Alana sniped.

"Either way, the point stands, Alana. He is not helpless. Nor do I believe he would simply allow a significant other to harm him."

"As a friend, since you see him more frequently than I do, please try to encourage him to sleep a bit more, if possible?" Alana asked. Hannibal only inclined his head and leaned back as the waiter stepped up to enquire about dessert.

Hannibal ordered absently for himself, something light, and waited for Alana to place her order and the waiter to leave.

"You did not ask me to dinner to discuss Will Graham, Alana." He said eventually

"No. But seeing as you are uncomfortable when I enquire about you, Will seems a safe choice, since he is a friend, and we both care about him." Alana said as she took a delicate sip of the white wine Hannibal had selected for her.

"Ah," Hannibal said eloquently and Alana frowned at him.

"What?"

"A touch of concern that there was someone to cause the injury to Will's hand at all?" He asked with a flick of his lip and Alana choked on her wine.

"No. Hannibal, no. Just... Will is a friend. That's all."

"As you say. I will admit to overhearing a rumor about you and... Doctor Wesley...." Hannibal trailed off. When Alana blushed tellingly an eyebrow went up.

"I thought you didn't listen to rumors, Hannibal."

"I may listen, but I do not give credence to them, Alana. Though, I have found it useful to know what others are saying."

"Of course you do." She muttered. "Is there anything you don't hear about?"

"Drinks after the opera provide the most enlightening discussions."

"So... your circle knows about Wesley asking me on a date?"

"You turned him down?" Hannibal asked, surprised.

Alana bit her lip, "I have a second date tomorrow evening?"

"I hope it goes well then, Alana." Hannibal offered, the corners of his lips turning upwards in amusement. She was nearly incandescent with happiness.

Hannibal took care of the check and helped Alana with her coat, walking her to her vehicle before he headed back to his office.

When he arrived, his secretary greeted him with a smile and there was a package waiting for him.

He carried the plain wrapped box with him, looking up the return address with idle curiosity, only to find that it is an abandoned lot.

He slid on gloves and cut the tape with a scalpel that was near to hand. He blinked and just examined the gift, for it is another gift, and there was another, familiar, typed note.

saw this, reminded of you. enjoy.

Hannibal lifted the matched Japanese tea set from its packaging and sighed. Tucked into the corner was a fresh box of the tea he kept in his study, his favorite blend, the one he never brought into the office.

Hannibal sank into his office chair, fingers steepled together as he stared at the set. Someone has been watching him very closely, but of course, they have been in his home, so of course they looked around.His admirer knows about the tea and has... at least chosen the right type of tea set.

He traced a finger along the delicate rim of fine bone china and cannot quite explain the smile tugging at his lips as he considered it all.Someone took the time to find something unique that he would appreciate, someone looked close enough to see him.

Glancing at the clock for a moment, he gathered up the packaging and tucked it out of sight before arranging the tea set into a space on the storage cabinet near the door, moving books over to make space.

Once that was done he straightened his jacket and stepped up to the door to greet his patient.

"Hello Will, would you please come in?"

"Doctor Lecter, you look almost disappointed, expecting someone else?" Will quipped as he stepped inside.

"Of course not, I was merely lost in thought. How are you today?" Hannibal said, plastering on an easy smile

"My hand hurts, but I returned that insane duck to my neighbor. It did not like being removed from the roof. How are you, Doctor Lecter?"

"Very well, please, have a seat," Hannibal said, gesturing.Will sat and Hannibal mirrored him, folding his hands over each other and leaning back in the chair.

"So... Pleasantries aside. How have you really been, Will?"

"Nightmares are about usual. Last night... one that I remember clearly? I was frantically trying to remember the stages in the life cycle of Calliphoridae, and not remembering it, while sitting on the stand in a courthouse." Will raised a sardonic eyebrow even as he stared over Hannibal's shoulder.

"Is there something you feel you have forgotten or missed? Those kinds of nightmares are not usual for you?" They weren't interesting; pedestrian stage fright nightmares, not to Hannibal. He saw those twice a day and three times on Thursdays.

"Considering how disappointed Jack was, that I more or less walked away from that scene the other day? I... expected that sort of thing. Usually I don't remember those."

"Jack must learn to handle disappointment, it is not your job to protect him from that."

"They are still pulling bodies out of that. It goes back... years." Will rose to his feet and started wandering, as he usually did. Hannibal watched as he paused in front of the storage cabinet.

"I also keep..." Will paused and took a breath, fingers flexing on the shelf, "Ever have a dream where you are having sex... can hear your lover... but only feel the sweat under your hands and the feel of their hips as you move?"

"This disturbs you?" Hannibal asked.

"Little bit, I'm not fifteen."

"You are human... certain drives cannot be fully set aside, Will. Are you tending to your needs adequately?"

"Excuse me?"

"How often do you masturbate, Will?"

Will turned and just stared.

"It is not an unreasonable question."

"it's invasive and personal, Hannibal!"

"You are here seeking therapy are you not? It is pertinent."

"Knew I shouldn't have mentioned that..." Will muttered, pacing away and pausing to run his fingers over the stag.

"You mentioned it, because you wanted my insight. What about it disturbs you?"

"I guess, the unknown portion? I'm not talking about a dark room, Hannibal... it's like I'm blind in that dream. No sight at all."

"Perhaps you are blindfolded."

"No, Hannibal, I'm not going there, discussing that with you."

"Such things are confidential."

"Until Jack asks." Will snarled.

"No Will, even under this arrangement I do understand what is and isn't relevant to your work."

"Then let's discuss what's relevant to my work, that's why I'm here after all."

"Your sleep is relevant to your work, it is not relevant to Jack."

"If I'm not sleeping, I'm not functioning."

"Are you sleeping?"

"The same amount as usual for me."

"Last night?"

"A few hours, took a walk."

"Did you go back to sleep after the dream that disturbed you?"

"Took the duck back."

"Will..."

"No, I was busy tending my hand." He said and waved it dismissively. "Duck got me."

"Why does not knowing who you are with disturb you, Will?" Hannibal asked, going directly for the heart of the matter.

"Wouldn't it disturb you? Being so intimate with someone you don't know?"

"You are looking at it from that angle, Will?"

"What angle?"

"Lack of knowledge is what is bothering you. Are you considering a new relationship?"

Will frowned.

"Er?" He shrugged.

"I will take it as you are not consciously considering a relationship. You are used to... seeing more than most people. Being presented an intimate situation where you are lacking knowledge of your partner is understandably jarring, Will."

“Can we… not?” Will asked. Hannibal nodded.

"Are any of your students causing problems?"

"No more than usual. We are going over some of the older insect cases. I pulled in some of Grissom's work out of the LVPD Crime Lab as a contrast. They are getting it, thankfully."

"Oh good,"

"Usually I have one or two that struggle. The students aren't the stressor this time."

"What do you think is?"

"Last count was fifteen bodies, ages ranging from five to fifty-five, Hannibal."

"That distresses you? We've seen similar..."

"Over ten years, they think. We're waiting on timetable for the most recent... but...." Will rubbed at his eyes and sighed.

"is it the timescale or is it the number of corpses..."

"Both?" Will managed before throwing up his hands, "Why doesn't this bother you? You were right behind me out there..."

"But I am used to compartmentalizing, Will. Do you doubt you will catch this person?"

"No, we'll catch him." Will said. "What bothers me is that we didn't even know he existed."

"How many of the killers you are asked to profile only come to your notice after the third or fourth kill, Will?"

"The working definition of a serial killer is someone who commits at least three murders over more than a month with an emotional cooling off period in between." Will said, tone shifting. Hannibal smiled and nodded.

"If it is over ten years, then you do have a serial killer that didn't feel a need to... display... his work?"

"Yes. And honestly, that... worries me. If it weren't for that washout..."

"That is understandable."

"No seeming need to... display or draw attention. It... looks like each is a family, Hannibal."

"The idea that it is a family destroyer is troubling you?"

"Wouldn't that bother you?"

"It does." Hannibal said.

"I'm just... I feel stuck, Hannibal. Like I'm missing something obvious... but that scene was a disaster. There was so much disturbance due to the rain that.... " Will rubbed both hands over

his face and shook his head.

"Wait on your bugs, Will. Perhaps with that line established, more will become clear?" Hannibal offered. Will sighed but nodded.

"And I think that's my hour." Will said, rubbing a hand over his face.

"We can continue, if you feel the need?"

"No, you gave me something to focus on. Thank you, Doctor Lecter." Will said, the smile slight but real.

~*~*~

Hannibal sighed as he unlocked his front door. Will was... aggravated. Hannibal was certain the sexual dream was troubling Will more than the family destroyer.

His head lifted as he caught the faint scent of lavender. Apparently his admirer had shown up in the interim. He paused as a wrapped parcel waited on the side table.

When he unwrapped it, he raised an eyebrow. Japanese chef's knife and a ceramic honer. He took both into the kitchen, gave them a careful wash and tucked the new blade into its sheath and then paused, trailing a finger over the handle.

Something old... and something new.

Perhaps he was reading too much into this?

~*~*~

Weeks passed, and yet the Mill Pond case hadn't faded from Jack's memory, nor had he let up on Will. Will had gone through multiple sessions pouring over case notes and forensic photographs, all seeming to leave him frustrated and aggravated.

In early March, Hannibal decided that he had, quite frankly, had enough of Jack hounding Will. Therefore he decided to... give Will something else to focus on. He flipped through his Rolodex and picked out a name and then debated on a recipe. He settled on something and then slipped quietly out to hunt.

He returned with the pieces he had decided to keep, neatly labeled and sealed them, showered and retired to bed. The faint scent of lavender tickled his nose as he secured the house for the night, scalpel tucked up his sleeve.

The house was silent as he pulled open his bedside drawer and fished out lubricant. A moment to consider and he fished out a toy as well. He had already decided that his Admirer would not disrupt his usual pattern.

He smoothed the dark blue duvet down as he laid back on the end of the bed, propping his feet on the bench at the end. He wetted his fingers and reached down, toy tucked next to his hip.

Closing his fingers around his length, he looked up at the mirror that hung over the fireplace. He'd done this before, he found it... arousing to watch himself in the mirror. To have a gaze on him while he touched himself. He watched his own fingers glide along his shaft.

Hannibal felt his breathing catch as he took note of the scent of lavender hanging in the air again. He bit his lip but did not look towards the door, fingers working furiously for a while before he changed his pace, aching but making himself wait. He shuddered a little and then paused. He could feel eyes on him. He lay still for a few seconds before reaching for the lubricant and the toy he had pulled from the drawer. It only took him a few moments to slick the toy and then began to ease it into his body.

He shivered, catching his own eye in the mirror. This was filthy. His cock twitched as he watched the fake phallus sink further into his hole. A muffled moan slipped past his lips. He returned his fingers to his length once the toy was firmly in place. A flick of a switch and he forgot how to breathe for a moment.

Wrist working feverishly, he hissed and his thighs flexed, hips rising slightly as his body tried to pull away from the vibration pressed firmly against his prostate. He shuddered and squirmed, toes digging into the bench, hand gliding greedily along his length, tormenting himself with the sensations.

He gave a soft whine as he spilled over his fingers and lay still for a few seconds, breathing in the scent of lavender soap and his own release before he switched off the toy and eased it out of himself. He lay there for a few seconds, mentally gathering himself back together before he climbed off his bed, not looking toward the door, certain that his admirer was watching through the gap. He felt boneless and sated until he didn’t and began to feel like he wanted a shower more than he wanted to remain where he was.

When he emerged after a quick shower, this time dressed in black silk pajamas, he took note of the fact the gap in the door was wider and turned off the lights before climbing into bed. The scent was fainter, so he assumed his audience had left for the evening.

Chapter Two ~ March 13, 2010

The next morning, Hannibal was awakened by his cell phone. He answered and sighed; apparently, his little gift for Will had already been found.

Hannibal shook his head as he arrived at the address he was given by Jack. Grey clad women fluttered and murmured like horrified doves as he eased his way up the concrete stairs. As he had thought it would, light filtered through the stained glass window to illuminate the altar and the corpse lying there, her hands gently cupping the curve of her hips, right above the neatly closed sutures that ran low on her abdomen. Her throat was slashed down to the bone, head tipped back, eyes staring sightlessly up at the cross, seeming to meet the gaze of the crucified Christ hanging above her. Her dark hair was braided carefully in looped twin plaits like dark hangman nooses .

"Well..."

"Religious killing, or situational opportunist?" Hannibal murmured, dark gaze tracing along the suture line.

"We won't know until we get her on a table, Doctor Lecter. Hello."

"Hello Ms. Katz. Why is that?"

"The incision here seems a bit... off. It's low enough to have been a cesarean incision, but..."

"Victim has been identified as one Ms Clara Daughtry of Cherry Hill Medical Center. She's a nurse..." Will murmured, appearing on his right side.

"She's what?" Jack barked. Will flinched.

"I said, she's a nurse. Her purse was right here, Jack. Driver's license, badge, all of it." Will said, lifting his head and pointing to the sensible black bag resting on the front pew.

"So why was she here?"

"I don't know-" Will cut off when a young agent appeared.

"You're going to need more female agents, sir," he told Jack then added, "Nuns creep me out."

"Agent? Find out who the Sister Superior is, then talk to them, and get the nuns to move another twenty feet or so down the side of the church. Then your agents don't have to weave through a throng." Hannibal offered.

The agent glanced at Jack, who nodded, before turning back towards Will. "There are five of us in here. Can you work with that?"

"If Beverly will move, please?" Will asked, Beverly nodded and stepped off the dais. Hannibal remained where he stood, next to the pew, the click of the camera's shutter documenting the purse, wallet, and badge.

Will slipped up the steps, hiking boots surprisingly quiet as he moved over the red carpeted risers. He eyed the display in front of him, eyes glazed slightly, head tipping to one side, swiveling over the tiered candelabras.

"Jack? Unless we are missing a body right now, this is one of three. I bet organs are missing... though..." Will trailed off.

"Will?" Hannibal prompted, voice gentle.

"She wasn't killed here. He killed her elsewhere and brought her here to display. Positioned her so she's naked on an altar, most likely lacking a liver, maybe part of a lung... not sure about reproductive organs, but certainly her tongue as well. Naked on an altar, hands cupping... oh. She's an offering for somebody in particular." Will stopped speaking, turned and headed for the choir loft without a word to anyone.

Standing in the choir loft he looked down, moved positions, and then looked again from a corner.

"The candles are part of the design. Gamsby, go ask a sister what the usual color for this time of year is for the candles. Because I don't think it's supposed to be red right now..."

"The candles matter, Will?" Jack called up as Will looked down at the design, ignoring the whirr and click of the Nikon in the hands of the agent next to him.

"Is it just me or..."

"What, Lucas?" Will asked, voice quiet.

"Kinda looks like a broken heart with the way the wax is spilled to the left there."

The agent pointed and Will let his focus narrow down to how the candles were positioned, wax bleeding down the stands to have caught in the carpet, almost hidden due to the similar color.

"Huh."

“Why does the color matter, Will?” Hannibal asked, still below, by the pew.

"Yeah don't you--" Will started to say and cut off. Of course Hannibal didn't. He'd been raised in the USSR. "Purple for penance, pink for celebration, red for blood, white for Christmas and Easter days..." He glanced around and noticed the purple drapes on the walls. "It's lent, that bright red isn't used unless it's Easter week."

Hannibal tipped his head in that way he had to indicate that he was giving due and slow consideration to Will's words. "So the color is significant to the killer?"

Will returned to the ground floor and nodded at Jimmy. "This is... almost... tame by most of our standards... he... Jimmy? Five on the fact he washed her somewhere before he staged her."

Zeller paused mid photograph to look up at Will.

"You think..."

"Nothing under her nails, even for the surgical stitch... wait... why are the sutures red? Hannibal? In your professional opinion, is that medical thread or whatever?"

"I cannot answer that without a closer look, and I will leave that to the professionals for now, Will. But red is not a traditional choice. Black or a dark blue."

"That's useful to know." Will said.

“So… anybody wondering why somebody forty plus is wearing school girl braids?” Zeller asked, crouched and eyeing the dead woman.

"Will..." Jack asked, he looked fit to burst. "Is it the Ripper?"

"Jack, unless we missed a body somewhere... this is the first. It has care, artistry, hell... he even braided her hair, Jack. At first look, yes. I'd add it to the Ripper's card."

"Card?"

"Jack, I sort of keep a scorecard in my head, to keep which kill belongs to who. This has the marks of the Ripper, the staging, the positioning, a church... I have a guess for what's missing, but... I'll only know that once the team has had time to examine."

"And the person he's making the offering to?"

"Liver and heart, the Romans used to think the liver was the organ for love."

"Um... Doctor Lecter? Does the tongue have any significance? That's... missing." Zeller called, gloved fingers carefully tipping open the corpses' mouth.

"I don't believe it would be... polite, Mr. Zeller." Hannibal murmured, gesturing to the surroundings. "Also, that seems fairly obvious if one thinks about it."

Zeller coughed awkwardly. “Um… braids?”

"He has a younger sibling, possibly a daughter, he was an attentive caregiver."

"Where did that come from? The Ripper has a kid?"

"You ever known a man to be able to make braids like that who didn't have a daughter or sister?" Will asked pointedly and Jack gaped at him. Will turned away and stared at the body when Jack didn’t immediately respond.

"Hmm... The Ripper is in love?" Will said. "No..." He eyed the body. "Courting, this is a first offering, the heart is open to..." Will's voice lowered. "Someone's trying to date the Ripper. Someone who knows who he is."

"And the Ripper is responding? Are you telling me this isn't the Ripper, or it is, which one, Will?"

"This is a response *from* the Ripper to a specific target. But... I haven't seen anything... mmm... let's call it contained... enough to be seen as an opening gesture of any of the other score cards I have in my head, Jack."

"Professor?"

"Yes, Gamsby?" Will asked, turning to look up at the agent still perched in the choir loft.

"You are proposing that this is a response to something we don't see... so somebody is making... overtures to the Ripper, and we don't know what those are?"

"Exactly. And this time I won't ask for a paper on how you got there." Will teased lightly.

Hannibal's lip quirked up.

"And that is why he was one of my favorite students two semesters ago, Hannibal." Will murmured.

"He's competent?" Hannibal asked and Will nodded.

"Very, and he can actually talk to me without making me want to punch him." He answered quietly.

"Will... this is... a little early for the Ripper."

"You said he goes quiet for about eighteen months. We're... what... sixteen months down... so he's a couple months early, Jack?"

"Perhaps he is eager to begin his relationship in earnest?" Hannibal offered.

"That would be a nightmare..." Zeller muttered. Will frowned.

"Aside from the obvious reasons... word choice, Zee?"

"Could you imagine two killers of this caliber loose, in the same area? We'd have mass panic in the streets."

"No one said the person the Ripper is making this offering to is a killer, just that *they* know he is." Will corrected.

"So what... the Ripper has a groupie?" Beverly asked, leaning back on her heels from where she was cataloguing the purse.

"Something like that?" Will said with a shrug.

"Same one who was copying Hobbs?"

"The Ripper was copying Hobbs."

"Will?"

"Remember when I said, I needed to see a negative to see the Shrike clearly? That's what that was."

"So the Ripper wanted you to catch Hobbs, these serial killers are crazy." Zeller muttered.

"Preaching to the choir." Will grumbled in return.

"For all we know, Hobbs was encroaching on his territory. Some people are weirdly possessive about the oddest things. Hey, she was a geriatrics specialty."

"Geriatrics?" Will asked. "You sure?"

"Yeah, look," Zeller handed over the hospital id.

Will examined the id and frowned.

"So... what about her... caught the Ripper's eye? We're still not finding his hunting pattern... and how much longer do we need to be here, Jack?"

"You are sure it's the Ripper?"

"Yes. So this is one of three. How long before he kills again?"

"Within days? A week at most. He moves fast, we know that."

"I've got a class to teach, Bev? Please tell me if I'm right on what's missing, I'll swing by after class."

"Don't forget to eat today, Will." Beverly called as she sealed the purse into an evidence bag.

Will waved a hand to show he'd heard as Hannibal followed him out of the church and down the steps.

"You haven't been eating?"

"Do you like eating after staring at corpses all day?" Will sniped, suddenly prickly and hostile.

"Do you have time for breakfast?"

"Corpse, Hannibal, and I have class." Will reiterated, somehow unsurprised that Hannibal had parked next to him.

"You should eat, it isn't healthy to skip meals."

"I'm not hungry."

"You should have something, Will."

"I have a protein shake and a few bars in my office. Will that suffice until I can get through my class, Hannibal? I might feel like eating after class... we're discussing the Ripper today, so I may not... depends on how much I have to look at the slides."

"Would you mind meeting with me for lunch? There is a little bistro I have been told to try, by Alana?"

Hannibal watched Will re-arrange his schedule in his head. "I can spare an hour and a half?"

"I shall text you the address then."

Only once Hannibal was in his car did he pause and consider what his admirer might think of his little offering. A cool smile curved his lips as he pulled away from the church.

~*~*~

Hannibal tucked himself into the back of Will's classroom, leaning against the door, watching Will present.

"The Chesapeake Ripper, as he is styled, has killed for at least a period spanning three years . The kills are always theatrical in some form or another. The first sounder was over a nine day period, Annapolis, Essex, and Baltimore."

Hannibal looked up , realizing Essex and Annapolis had been transposed.

"Then the Ripper went quiet. Or at least, stopped being so… ostentatious, though, *I believe* he took a break. Eighteen months passed. And then he another sounder of three in the space of a few weeks." The images appeared on the screen, and he studied the tongue resting in a bible with hidden glee.

"His trophies are always organs, surgically removed. As can be seen here and here. We believe he took his third sounder after a shorter cooling off period. The last known victim was an FBI Trainee. Her arm was discovered.... *just* her arm. There have been a few more killings that fit the Ripper's profile, but without the sounder that is also his signature."

"Professor? Why do you say 'sounder'?"

Will's lips twitched. "Because he sees them as pigs. And a set of three pigs is a sounder, and he seems content to take in threes."

"Is there a list of what has been...well... missing?"

"Two hearts, a liver, pancreas, kidneys, lung, another liver, tongue... intestines.. actually make that a third liver, three tongues, a kidney, and as of today another heart." Will said, pausing to scan a text.

"That's a lot of organ meat."

"Why do you say meat?" Will asked, surprised at Hannibal interrupting.

"Just a thought," Hannibal murmured, "my butcher sources offal for me specifically."

Various trainees and agents swiveled their heads.

"Doctor Lecter also consults for the FBI and has been working on the Ripper case."

"As of today, Professor?" Hannibal asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Mmhm. We don't know what he may have removed from Lass. The arm was the only thing found, so I refuse to speculate there."

"Organ meat? Is all of that... you know, edible?" An agent asked. Will frowned.

"You are the chef in the room, Hannibal?"

"Are you suggesting... Agent..." Hannibal trailed off and turned towards the agent in question.

"I..." Will paused. "That would make sense actually. He runs a sounder... Stocks up. So it's not a compulsion but..."

Will heard somebody gag and only sighed when he heard a trash can move.

"Get used to it. You will vomit on site. You will encounter sights that really, seriously, make you question humanity. Bottle of water is on the left side of the desk, next to the tissues."

Hannibal raised his eyebrows. Will just shrugged. There was a reason each station had two plastic trash cans, a box of tissues and two bottles of water each.

"Wait... the Ripper is... "

"We don't know for certain, but it's as valid a theory as any right now. Well done. wouldn't be the first serial killer that also ate victims."

Will was staring at the corpse on the powerpoint slide.

"Yeah. He's eating them. They're pigs to him, remember?" He said quietly, more to himself than the room, after a moment.

He could feel various students staring at him as Hannibal stepped down into the center area and easily slipped the clicker from Will's fingers. A brief study of the device and he was clicking backwards.

"Side button for pointer?" Hannibal checked. Will nodded and perched a hip on his desk.

"Doctor Lecter is a psychiatrist. I just... profile."

"For reference, this is Annapolis, and this is Essex. But... the killer took a heart here, the liver and kidneys here... and Will? I believe... the reason that one didn't find a leg..." Hannibal trailed off, laser light steady on the stump of a limb.

"Is he killing again when his stocks run low, if he's eating them, that is?"

"It seems like it."

"He went quiet for two years and then Miriam Lass's arm appeared. There is an argument that we had another sounder, but... I'm not convinced."

"And now?"

"Now? We have a two week window while he restocks, before he fades away again." Will admitted, turning to face Hannibal even as the students murmured above them.

"He's active again?"

"A body was found this morning. It fits his pattern, so yes, we have roughly two weeks and two more victims."

"So he's active again. Why'd he wait nearly eighteen months?"

"If the cannibal theory works, he may have run out of his choice of food, and is restocking the larder. He only took the heart, liver, and kidneys on this one."

"Only.... you say that like it's a good thing." One of the students murmured, looking a bit green.

"Annapolis. Took the heart of his victim. Essex, liver and kidneys and a piece of lung. Baltimore, intestines, leg, explains why we found the foot though..." Will trailed off and stared at the slide.

"Oh?"

"How many bones in a human foot?" Will asked with a grimace.

"Twenty six, Will. I was a surgeon before I was a psychiatrist, remember?"

Will offered a slight smile to Hannibal, who pulled him out of his thoughts, "While I was going to assign a paper on patterns and timespan as relates to a serial killer, I will also offer up the option for a paper on cannibalism."

"You think it's a possibility, professor?"

"I don't know, write the paper, *convince me.* "

Will held out a hand and Hannibal put the clicker back into his grasp. The students cleared out and a janitor eased into the room to switch out the trash can.

"You handled the student getting sick rather... well." Hannibal commented.

"I can hardly give somebody hell for it, when I carry sick bags."

"So you do not..."

"They're human, they learn to handle themselves one way or another. So long as they don't compromise a scene no one will think any worse of them." Will shrugged, "I mean, we watched a VSP officer and an Agent practically have a foot race to get to a spot they could throw up at, Hannibal."

"You suggested that was due to the circumstances and not the bodies themselves. Do you still wish to have lunch, considering what was discussed?"

"Did you actually like that little place Alana dragged both of us to... sandwiches, salads, some seafood?"

"You are wishing to avoid most meat?"

"Considering what the theory was that was just tossed out? Please?"

"They had a lovely pasta with shrimp and scallops. I will gladly drive?" Hannibal agreed. He gathered up his coat and followed.

They ate, they shared a bottle of a decent wine that paired well to both their meals, and Hannibal drove Will back to Quantico, having picked up a business card from the loudmouth conman trying to sell cryptocurrency to his companion at the next table on the way out.

Will met with Jack, Hannibal still following at that point, and they present the cannibal theory. Silence hung in the room after they stopped talking. Will was braced for an explosion. Instead, he got almost numb acceptance.

"You're serious?" Jack asked.

"Yes, it makes sense Jack, all the edible organs go," Will shrugged slightly.

"And what, he positions the bodies for kicks?"

"These victims aren't chosen entirely randomly, we just haven't found the pattern yet."

"You two are telling me that.... he's killing to eat them... and then turning around and displaying them for...."

"For some reason, yes. I was almost completely right for what was missing. Wasn't expecting the kidneys or part of the intestine either. He also took a chunk from her back, post mortem, according to Beverly."

"So... He's making sausages?"

"Jack." Will warned, jaw clenched.

"It is a possibility, Will." Hannibal murmured, privately deciding to dispose of the intestine he had taken, as they would now be looking for that.

"I'm sorry, but being flippant about it just... bugs me." Will muttered. “Actually, i’m not sorry. Who jokes about something like this?”

"Jack has his own means of coping with these things."

"Yeah I know, I just don't like it."

"Does the theory support any known pattern?"

"He always seems to take more from body two or three. I mean, missing limbs, oh... ribs? That... okay... cannibal." Will managed, more or less sitting down in one of the visitor's chairs.

"Definitely?" Jack pressed.

"Yeah, definitely."

"So... how do we catch him?"

Will sighed. "We have somewhere in the range of two weeks, at least two more kills... though now... I'm wondering."

"Will?"

"If he's eating them... I'm just going to toss it out, okay? But I looked up the average statistics. Average male is about 168 pounds. How much of that is meat once we strip out bones and inedible bits?"

Jack blinked. "Fifty or so, maybe?"

"How long does it take to get through fifty pounds of meat, when we know from his displays, he's not taking that much?"

"That assumes, Will, that his displays are his only kills." Hannibal pointed out quietly. “Also, a quarter of a cow is about ninety pounds of meat, just to give perspective."

"I don't think I want that perspective, Hannibal. *Jesus* ."

"Human meat is entirely edible," Hannibal mused, "in some ancient cultures eating the dead was a religious event with important significance, particularly in some South American areas. It is a relatively modern cultural taboo." Hannibal said quietly. "One that collapses quickly under severe stress."

Will fixed him with an odd look.

"Many explorers at the poles or in the Amazon have admitted in very recent history to eating their dead comrades to survive, famously a doctor whose plane crashed in the Amazon rainforest did so. Historically, some have displayed a compulsion after the fact to repeat the experience."

"You think the Ripper might be traumatized and recreating a trauma of some sort?"

"The issue with that theory, Will, is that had the Ripper been a victim of a cannibal, there would be no Ripper."

"So... what then? He acquired a taste for it somewhere along the way and now it's just part of his diet?" Jack demanded. Hannibal blinked once.

"Perhaps, there are few people who would admit to such an act unless they could be certain they would be viewed sympathetically for resorting to it."

"Hannibal? Discounting your dinner parties... how often do you go through about that much meat?"

"Dinner parties are when I go through that much, Will. Because I prefer fresh, I tend to order in smaller quantities when it is just myself or close friends."

"How long would it take you to say, go through a side of pork or beef?" Will asked.

"Those are two very different animals, Will. I would expect as I do tend to eat rather a lot of meat that it would take a year of fine dining when feeding one person daily to consume the volumes we are discussing,"

"What makes you say fine dining?" Will asked

"You asked about my dinner parties, Will, and the menus for those are all fine dining."

"Plus..." Will said slowly. "If he makes a show of the corpses, it's reasonable to think he'd make a show of the meat."

"Perhaps." Hannibal agreed. Jack just stared between them.

"Just thought you should be aware, Jack. I've got a stack of papers that need me to grade them before next Tuesday, so..."

"I'll know where to find you, Will." Jack agreed. Hannibal watched Will make his escape and perched on a chair.

"Yes?"

"I believe you wished to know how therapy is going?"

"Yes." Jack leaned forward.

"These are taxing, Jack. He's having sleep problems, loss of appetite. The usual problems one has when dealing with repeated trauma."

"Well, with the Ripper gearing up again... Jesus, a cannibal, really?"

“That is the current theory, Jack.” Hannibal agreed.

~*~*~

It was only when Hannibal walked through the front door that evening, a trace of lavender on the still air that he wondered if his admirer might be jealous of the fact he had lunch with Will. If he was being watched that closely.

He moved through the house, relaxed and paused at the refrigerator. Another carton of duck eggs lay in waiting for him within. He made a pleased noise to himself and decided on a glass of wine while he went over patient notes.

He blinked when his cell phone rang, not expecting the interruption, but answered anyway.

"Hello Will."

"Hello Hannibal. I was wondering, since Jack will be pushing us hard, would you like to have breakfast with me tomorrow?"

"Only if I am allowed to bring breakfast."

Chapter Three ~ March 14, 2010

Hannibal showed up, nudging open Will's office door and Will just frowned at the box Hannibal placed on the corner of his desk. Foil wrapped packages and a brick (of all things) were pulled from the confines. Will just stared, wordless, because it was so far from the usual elegance Hannibal presented him with.

"Blackberry and strawberry, and a lamb filled *kibinai* . They are a traditional pie, of sorts, from my home country."

"Would you be really offended if I said that I'll stick to the fruits?" Will asked awkwardly as he eyed the pastry parcels warily.

"Not at all. This was something I learned to make when I was very young." Hannibal broke a corner off of one of the lamb pies and watched it steam for a few moments before he took a bite.

Will and Hannibal were finishing breakfast, seated companionably in Will's small office when there was a tap on the door.

"Professor Graham?"

"Agent Gamsby, what did you need from me?" Will asked, rising easily.

"I was hoping to have a quick discussion with you, I would have waited for your office hours but... It's more urgent than that."

"Does it need to be just me?"

"I believe we are finished, Will?" Hannibal murmured.

"Actually, with Doctor Lecter here, it means I only have to go over it once."

"Come in and shut the door." Will tucked himself into a corner and waited.

"That nurse? Clara Daughtry? She was your floor nurse while you were sick."

"My... I have never been in a geriatric ward, I'm not *that* old, agent." Will answered, tone one of mock offence.

"She recently moved to geriatrics, Professor." Gamsby offered hastily, "She was working the general floor when you were admitted by a Doctor... Sutcliffe, almost two years ago."

"The encephalitis, Will." Hannibal murmured. Will made a small noise of acknowledgement.

"And Sutcliffe died two days later... I do not mean to question the Federal Bureau but..." Hannibal trailed off delicately.

"I don't remember a lot of that..." Will admitted. "I'm not going to remember some random nurse."

"I just wanted you to be aware that there is a link to you, Professor. Just in case anything else comes up?" Gamsby said, before glancing at Hannibal.

"I've seen that look... what else do you need, Lucas?"

"It's a really personal question but… Aare... you still in therapy?"

Hannibal remained still, just watching the agent, giving nothing away.

"Yes. Considering what I lecture on and what I look at... However, Hannibal and I work together on cases. Why?"

"Um... how does one go about finding a psychiatrist?"

"You are far more intelligent than many of your peers. There is a list of approved psychiatrists. I can think of five with potential openings that are on that list, if you would like, Agent Gamsby?"

"That would be helpful, sir."

"Most agents have to be dragged, kicking and screaming. These five are on the list, and have openings, I do believe." Hannibal said, scribbling down a list and then passing it over to the Agent who nodded and tucked it into his wallet.

Only once Lucas is gone does Will look over at Hannibal, "Kicking and screaming?"

"Jack insisted, you just were rude about it." Hannibal murmured. Will smiled slightly.

"Please remember to drink more than coffee, Will."

"We'll see. I've almost got these papers graded. And if something else pops up. I need to check with Jack, actually, I need to drop off my report."

"Yet another profile to add to the folder of the Ripper?"

"Yes."

"Any luck on collating it all into a list of suspects yet?" Hannibal asked and Will shrugged.

"Not my department. Ask Jack."

Hannibal left Will to his work and drove to the office, frowning as he signed for a package. He carried it into the office with him and slowly unwrapped it, the faint trace of lavender telling him, once again, it is his admirer.

Inside the box is a new set of art pencils and several sketchbooks. When he leafed through the blank pages a typed note slipped out.

because you draw as a relaxation, i thought it only polite to replenish your stock. she was beautiful. as you were.

Hannibal blinked, tipped his head and considered the note. He tucked two of the new sketchbooks underneath his current one and set the new package of pencils next to them. The other two he set aside to take home with him, noting that his admirer has once again used the abandoned lot.

So, his admirer had seen his offering. And liked it, perhaps. Hannibal tuckeds the note into a sketchbook and then rose from behind his desk to greet his first patient of the day.

~*~*~

When Hannibal arrived home he blinked at the note waiting on the kitchen island.

i know you will be busy for a bit beautiful. i can wait until you are still again. thinking of you.

Hannibal twitched. He almost wanted to hurry his kills now. He'd grown used to his admirer lurking.

He prowled the room, debating. He paused when he stepped up to the refrigerator and found beef tongue sitting in labeled paper packaging.

Hannibal smiled. Apparently his admirer has not stopped feeding him. He made himself a simple meal from the tongue, with a salad and a nice wine.

Once finished and the dishes taken care of, he settled with a sketchbook and started drawing, contemplating his next move.

~*~*~

Two days later, Jack was on proverbial pins and needles when Hannibal walked into his office.

"Yes?"

"How are you feeling, Jack?"

"He's quiet still. How do you *think* I'm feeling?"

"A bit frustrated?" Hannibal offers, voice mild.

"Sorry. What did you come to see me about?"

"Will mentioned that he had added another piece to the profile, I was wondering if it had been collated yet?"

"Zeller will have a basic collation, if you want to bother him? I'm still trying to figure out our Mill Pond Killer."

"As is Will." Hannibal murmured before backing out of the office and heading for the lab.

"If we don't have the keys, just pick the damn lock. It's already evidence, and logged as such... it's really very simple, Jimmy, look, I'll show you."

Hannibal paused in the doorway, just watching as Zeller pulled out a set of lockpicks and deftly got to work on a rather impressive lock on a small safe.

"So... you heard that there's a cannibal theory going around, Zee?" Price asked head bent over a box of evidence, his back to Hannibal.

"Cannibal theory?"

"Yes. Will's class tossed out the idea that the Ripper is *eating* his trophies."

Zeller paused what he was doing and fixed Price with a concerned look.

"We have bodies..."

"Not all of them, just the missing organs."

"Why would he leave prime cuts and take the offal?" Zeller asked and it was Price's turn to look concerned.

"Really? I tell you he's a cannibal and that's your first question?"

"What was yours, Brian?" Beverly asked as she looked up from a report.

"Why do we always get fucking *cannibals* ?"

"I believe, Mr. Price, that would be necrophilia."

Zeller and Katz exchanged looks and quickly looked away, both biting their lips to keep from cackling.

"Doctor Lecter... there has been no... indication that the Ripper has a physical interest in the corpses, or, rather at least not in that manner? His pathology doesn't present that way." Jimmy Price babbled, spinning around. Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

"I was merely pointing out the difference, Mr. Price. And no, I agree with your assessment, there does not seem to be a sexual interest in how the Ripper views the corpses post mortem."

"So he's crazy, but not *that kind of crazy* ." Price agreed quietly. "Makes sense."

"So, Will thinks he's the 'eats them' sort of crazy. What do you think, Doctor Lecter?"

"Ms. Katz, I was actually hoping to get a look at the profile that Will amended. Since there is another body to add to his understanding of the Ripper."

"No problem, come over here. I'll load the documents up for you." She said and gestured to her computer screens.

Hannibal sat on a cold metal stool and leaned forward to read the screen, hearing Will's voice in his imagination as he skimmed along.

"He hasn't formally offered the cannibal angle yet?" Hannibal asked once he finished reading.

"Not yet. He came in and took copies of all of the Ripper's known kills, probably holed up in his office, if you want to talk to him about it."

"Perhaps I may." Hannibal agreed. “Thank you.”

~*~*~

Because of an emergency with a patient, and his regular workload interfering, it was nearly a week before Hannibal was able to call on Will. He was also waylaid by at least two members of the church scene, asking him small questions about his observations and what *he* thought about the cannibal theory.

Hannibal tapped politely on Will's door jamb. Will murmured permission to enter, head still bowed over a file that was propped open in his lap.

"Hello Will."

"Hannibal, I thought you were one of my students. Please, sit down."

"The lab is buzzing about your cannibal theory. Of course, there is still the question of necrophilia floating around about the Ripper..."

"It's not overtly sexual with the Ripper." Will snapped.

Hannibal raised an eyebrow at that as Will looked up. "Jack still argues there has to be one, Hannibal. Though... if he's eating his trophies..." Will shrugged."Did you need to see me, Hannibal?"

"I wanted to talk to you about the profile. I noticed you stripped out certain specifics."

"Oh?"

"Your assertions of the Rippers sadism have been toned down."

"If the cannibal angle is accurate... he's not feeding his sadistic streak so much as filling his stomach."

"Oh? But the displays?" Hannibal asked, always interested to see how others viewed him through the lense of his kills.

"I split my understanding. The kill is about meat, feeding a base need. The displays? Those... that feeds his need to be theatrical and sadistic."

"He has multiple personalities?"

"No, more like multiple facets, not all killers are just caricatures of evil, this isn't Jack's museum." Will tapped a pen idly against the desk as he thought how to word his explanation. "His profile, even the early ones, doesn't lean much towards any indication of sexual deviancy. Violence by the bucketful, yes. But, his methods are too... I'd call it *precise* ."

Will got to his feet and stretched. "He's methodical, cool about his kills. If there's rage there, it's tightly contained. Even Daughtry's killing, ear to ear, just deep enough to slice through everything but, he made a second cut to remove the tongue."

"You said he humiliates them, why would he wish to do that?"

"Revenge? All these people have something in common, something he decided was worth killing over. He's an intelligent psychopath but even they have patterns and motives.he works in sounders of three, taking more from kill two or three, depending on what he... prefers?" Will trailed off, staring down at one of the kills.

"Has something occurred to you, Will?" Hannibal asked.

"If... if he's eating them... why is he going for organs? I mean, we figured out the other day that you can get about as much meat as a quarter of a cow, which is about ninety pounds, and you can pull about seventy-five from a human... why isn't he taking as much as he can from one?"

Hannibal paused.

"Perhaps the display matters more and it is simply a case of priorities?"

"What, cannibalism is a byproduct of having the body available?"

"Have I managed to tie you in knots, Will?"

"Just trying to sort out his priorities. It's easier when I'm standing in front of one of his kills than with the photos. There's something about being able to move around that... helps."

"Shall we visit the forensics team then? Perhaps seeing Ms. Daughtry will give you more of a... perspective?"

"Did Jack sic you on me today?" Will asked, suddenly wary of Hannibal's interest.

"No, I was actually stopping by to check the profile to add a few insights of my own, but as you are currently mulling, I decided to be helpful?" Hannibal offered a soft smile.

Will locked all of the files into his cabinet and pocketed the key before he accompanied Hannibal back to the forensics lab.

"Will! I didn't think you'd be back here today."

"Doctor Lecter suggested I take another look at Ms. Daughtry."

"We had a look at her... Jimmy owes you five bucks. You were right. She was washed before she was staged. Only problem is, its municipal water."

"So nothing there that will help." Will agreed as the drawer was pulled out for him.

"He removed her tongue, liver, kidneys, and heart all through the incision in her abdomen and then closed off with red sutures." Beverly said, folding back the covering to the nurse's neck.

"What about the chunk he took?"

"Lower back area. Not sure how it would cook, if he's eating it."

Jimmy, Brian and Beverly all looked towards the resident chef standing by the door.

Hannibal raised both eyebrows.

"Come on, Doctor Lecter, if she were a slab of beef..." Zeller trailed off.

"On a slab of beef," Hannibal said slowly, eyes flickering to the corpse for a moment and then back to Zeller, "that meat from the lower back would be a prime cut."

"So, following that... he took things high in iron... and a choice cut?" Will murmured, pacing slightly, moving back and forth along the end of the pull out.

"So it would seem."

"Why the tongue though? I mean, he left one as a bookmark."

"The liver is high in vitamin A in a human, Will, more so than iron." Hannibal murmured. Will huffed and waved a hand. Hannibal merely folded his hands behind his back and let Will work in his own fashion.

"The internal organs make sense if he's eating those. And the chunk of meat. But... tongue?"

"Beef tongue pot roast is one option for such meat. Slow roasted or pan seared." Hannibal offered.

"Is he anemic?" Price muttered. "All that red meat?"

"Or he just likes the taste?" Zeller offered, shrugging.

"Has he ever gone for the brain or spinal column?" Jack asked from the doorway.

Everyone in the room blinked at him for a moment.

"Most hunters are being warned away from the brain and spinal column in deer and... well... mad cow disease." Jack offered.

"No clue." Zeller murmured even as Will bowed his head and thought.

"Nothing that I can recall that we can trace as his, Jack.” Will said with a shrug.

“Honestly, it’s mostly organ meats and various chunks of missing meat."

"It certainly confirms that he thinks of the victims as animals then." Will muttered.

"So, his brain isn't being turned into swiss cheese due to eating something... ill." Jack murmured as Will snapped on a pair of gloves and carefully pulled the sheet back to peer at the incision.

"Why red thread?"

"Fate perhaps?" Hannibal offered.

"No, the Ripper is meticulous, I'm not above assuming even this is deliberate." Will snapped, seemingly offended.

"Ah, you misunderstood. Or I wasn't clear enough. Red thread of fate, Will." Hannibal explained.

"That's... Eastern Myth, right?" Zeller asked. Hannibal nodded slightly.

"Could he be eastern?" Price asked.

"There's always been something exotic about him, foreign in some way that isn't just that he's a killer. Not many Americans know the elements of art that make a renaissance classic the way he does, at least, not outside of art history classes. I've always assumed he was European of some sort." Will shrugged slightly, gaze fixed on the report he was reading before glancing up at Hannibal, “I've heard of it, but only surface... what is it, Hannibal?"

"The red thread of fate is a myth that says two people are connected by a red thread, the two so connected are destined to be lovers."

"So... whoever he's trying to court... or is courting him... he's suggesting it's fated?"

"Our cannibal is a romantic?" Zeller huffed and Will shrugged.

"I actually had to cut the thread to pull it loose, he'd tied it off in such a way that... it looked like a continuous loop."

"Our cannibal tied a never ending loop. Showing he wants... what?" Will murmured, eyeing the plain black stitches that replaced it.

"if it's a courtship... Didn't medieval people make promise rings out of locks of their own hair?"

"That would give us something to start from, genetic material we could toss into CODIS." Zeller said, leaning forward.

"He's been... careful." Will murmured.

"So he chooses something safer for him... but just as symbolic, the red thread of fate." Beverly said with a growl. “Fiber trace… red is the third most common color used after black and blue, so it’s… a dead end.”

“I order sutures, I’ve had too many close calls, Agents. But my last shipment was a combination of red and blue. I never pick a color when ordering online.” Hannibal explained.

"Anyone else a bit.... worried that we have a courting serial killer cannibal and we don't know who he's courting?"

"When we catch him, you can ask him who he was sending this invitation to, Zeller. Anything else, Will?" Jack asked, voice not softening as he barked.

"Not right now Jack, he's smitten with someone but I'm not taking anything new right now. Nothing we haven’t already gone over. Give me a few days on it.” Will said, rolling his shoulders, “Besides, we're just going to run with the cannibal line for now, we've got a window of time that's closing rapidly, Jack. What I can infer right now is that he's starting his sounder, one down, two more to go. I can't give you more than that."

"You mentioned the red was important, why red candles?"

"You mean, why did he choose to frame his display in red with red wax? There was no blood, Jack. For all I know, our killer likes the look of blood and recreated some of that using those candles."

"Um... about the no blood thing... how fast does it take somebody to bleed out with their throat cut like that?" Beverly asked, carefully drawing the sheet back up.

"A few minutes." Hannibal responded.

"So... do we have a blood soaked primary site somewhere or is the primary already hosed down and we'd never know walking by?"

"Given the Rippers history he's not going to get caught by leaving blood lying around, that evidence is going to be long gone." Jack said promptly.

"Unless... um... Hannibal... I remember standing in your kitchen one night, you were talking to a chef about blood?"

"Clarified pigs blood, yes. And the wine you brought me was lovely, Will."

"Can that be done with human blood?" Will asked, his tone held a note of hesitancy like he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"Considering the fact that blood separates if it is left standing too long? Probably, Will. I mean, think of some of the old scenes we've been called to... the blood separated." Zeller reminded. Will grimaced.

"Okay, bad question, thanks Zee."

"So you are working the cannibal angle?"

"Yes, Jack. A lot is making more sense, looking at him as a serial killer that's eating his trophies, some things make more sense. He's not keeping these in a jar somewhere. They are in a fridge or freezer." Will shrugged, sounding dismissive.

"Um can I just file an 'ew' response?"

Price chuckled. "Yes, you can. Glad somebody said it. Cannibals are..."

"Yeah." Zeller agreed.

"Anything else new?"

"Surgically removed the tongue, heart, liver, and kidneys."

"So we're going with a medical professional and not a butcher?"

"The cuts are too clean for a meat cleaver, too precise. I'm going with that." Will said absently. "He feels a bit too..." Will gestured frustrated, "artsy for a butcher."

~*~*~

Days passed and Hannibal watched the way Will seemed to sink back into his chair during their therapy sessions, becoming more and more relaxed as Jack became more and more rude and snarling.

"He's pushing for a deduction when I don't have all the pieces. it's like I've got the candlestick and the library... but I can't decide between Scarlett, White, or Mustard...."

"And you aren't sure who to ask to try and narrow down your list of suspects?" Hannibal murmured, crossing his legs at the ankle as his fingers moved a pencil over the fine paper.

"Something like that. This just feels like a change with the Ripper and Jack is obsessed but I'm not a miracle worker."

"Change? How so? What do you see changing about his design?" Hannibal asked, using Will's own words to ask the question.

"The woman on the altar... the way he cut her open to pull out the organs, he took the same path one would take to do a caesarian, right?"

"Yes, that is about the correct line to take a child out. Does that bother you, Will?"

"If he's courting somebody... but, it doesn't feel sexual... but..." Will dragged a hand through his hair, teeth caught in his lower lip.

"It feels intimate perhaps, as if the Ripper is seeking a deeper connection than lust?"

"So, I'm not way off base, seeing that? There's something in the profile, based in psychology, that actually leans that way?"

"The Romans did believe that the liver was the guiding organ when it came to love. So yes, there are some indications. Also, red is the color of passion and desire."

"And ties back to the thread of fate. If it weren't past Valentines...." Will shrugged. Hannibal inclined his head and smiled slightly. He'd found a sheep's heart in his fridge on Valentine's Day.

"So the Ripper is letting someone know that he or she-"

"He," Will cut in, firmly. "All the stats and indications say *he* ."

"He accepts their attempts at courtship?"

"Looks like. She was laid out on an altar like an offering... I wonder if... do you think the fact she was displayed feet to the sunrise had.... any significance?"

"Significance?" Hannibal prompted.

"I feel like, the fact she was on the altar, pointed towards the sun… isn't the sun male in most religions?"

"It is not in Japan, there the sun is a goddess. But, for the large part, you are correct. You think that was done for a purpose?"

"The entire thing was an offering, but the fact she was laid on an altar, stripped bare, throat laid open tongue gone.... It feels like the Ripper is saying he's speechless over... over being courted? That somebody sees him?"

"Any significance to the eyes being on the crucifix?"

"No idea, maybe he's saying he sees this person's sacrifice? Or he's worshipping them somehow?"

"God is not something one can touch. One can look at beauty, but deity is out of reach, even as a statue." Hannibal suggested.

"The Ripper can't reach the person courting him?" Will asked, head tilted thoughtfully.

"What is courting if not hoping one can touch, eventually? Perhaps he is offering himself?"

"To someone watching him."

Hannibal made a considering noise as Will leaned forward, hands tangling in his dark curls.

"Fuck. Jack's really not going to like that. Courting Cannibal and a... what the hell do we call this other...person?"

"No idea."

"Love interest? Fan? Potential meal?"

"What have our science colleagues been using?" Hannibal asked, leaning forward.

"Mostly? Lovestruck idiot, blame Zee." Will said, sighing.

"We can't be overheard saying that at crime scenes." Jack said. "And do we even know if this person knows he's the Ripper?"

Will actively flinched and then went rigid in his seat, gaze going horrified and shocked, fingers twitching actively towards his holster before he paused and swallowed hard. “Fuck, Jack.”

"Jack, it is rather... rude to interrupt a therapy session. I *expect* such things to be private." Hannibal said, laying aside his sketchbook and standing, dark eyes flashing.

"We've got another one."

Will jerked but did not lift his head.

"How long have you been standing there, Jack?"

"Not that long, come on, they're keeping this one fresh for us."

"I will drive?" Hannibal offered. Will nodded and got to his feet, grabbing his coat as he went.

Hannibal tossed Will his keys and gestured to him to go on ahead.

"Agent Crawford? If you *ever* interrupt a session and violate a patient's privacy with me again, you will not like my response. Anything you may have heard pertaining to Will's mental state is strictly confidential."

"That wasn't our arrangement, Hannibal."

"You will find that the FBI is not being billed for Will's sessions. You have no right to know what is said here without a court order, and do not test me, I may not release it even then."

"He's..."

"What you ask of him, what you *drag* him from scene to scene to watch and reconstruct... he is stable with these discussions, *that* is what you wanted. That is what you receive, Agent. He feels safe talking to me. However, I demand you respect a doctor-patient relationship."

"Fine."

"And Jack... I am coming with him, you cannot interrupt a therapy session and expect no repercussions."

"I don't give a --"

"I assure you, I *do* ." Hannibal gestured for Jack to leave, expression set hard.

Chapter Four ~ March 25, 2010

Hannibal slipped into the driver's seat of the idling Bentley.

"What did he hear?" Will's delivery was completely flat.

"I feel I must apologize to you, Will. I should have..."

"No, you are fine. I'm going to rip Jack a new one once I've stared down this scene though. Probably publicly." Will drew in a long breath to steel himself for hearing the worst.

"I may have... already voiced my displeasure." Hannibal admitted quietly and Will snorted.

"Unless you actually hurt him, you don't have to justify yourself to me." He declared, a smile playing about his lips as his tone turned musing, "I've never punched an actual FBI agent before; wonder what the average sentence for that is and if I'll get time knocked off for Jack being an asshole?" Will met Hannibal's eyes for a brief moment and then glanced away, biting back a grin at the momentary agreement he found there.

"I believe I'm *obligated* to remind you that physical violence rarely solves problems, Will." Hannibal recited blandly as he glanced down at his phone, reading the text. "Ah, I have our address."

"Why did Jack interrupt when he could have just texted both of us?"

"That is an excellent question to ask him."

"Before or after I get arrested?"

"I shall try to keep you level enough to not get arrested, Will." Hannibal didn't sound like he'd try very hard, though.

"Thank you. God, I'm glad I wasn't discussing anything personal, you know?"

"Were you considering it?" Hannibal's tone remained mild.

"Yeah, but... kinda glad I didn't now."

"And this is why I insist on *no* interruptions." Hannibal muttered darkly. "The entire point of therapy is that it is a safe space for you."

"Can we... lock the door, put a statue in front of it, a bell, or switch seats? So I know when it opens?"

Hannibal's fist tightened on the wheel for a moment, suddenly realizing that Will had constantly sat with his back to the door, trusting Hannibal to keep him safe, something most Agents never did, in the few clients he did have that were FBI.

Hannibal grit his teeth and forced himself to relax his temper at what the question from Will represented the loss of. Trust. Hard won and likely even harder to repair.

"If you would feel more comfortable, Will, I can have something installed that will warn the both of us when that door is opened. I am sorry, I never expected Agent Crawford to disrespect both of us like that."

"I should have," Will said quietly, "he's got form for it."

"It is not your job to police the behavior of-" He cut off. "Ah..." Hannibal parked and eyed the controlled chaos of police officers and navy jacketed FBI agents rushing to and fro.

"He did say it was fresh." Will commented.

Hannibal made an agreeing noise and pocketed his keys, slipping out of the vehicle, letting Will gather himself for what he would view inside. He glanced at his watch... five hours earlier than he'd expected...

It was a small art gallery, tucked off a side street, and he had left his 'display' covered in a black shroud, like all the other pieces installed. He kept his expression and body language schooled carefully neutral and waited for Will.

Will and Hannibal both showed their consulting badges to one of the FBI agents. Gamsby waved them forward from the other side of the scene tape, before he stepped aside, leaving an empty archway available for them to pass.

"Professor? As soon as I saw this, I cleared and held the room. As long as you and Doctor Lecter need."

Will nodded, took a breath and stepped through the arch with a mumbled thanks to the agent.

Everything but the bloody tableaux spread before him was draped in black shrouding. It gave the room the air of a funeral parlour even with the usual array of almost-too-bright lighting that art galleries tended towards. Hannibal watched as Will froze, weight shifted to take another step, hands balling into fists.

Swathes of blue cloth stained rust red curled around a pair of carefully posed figures. Red threads hung in the empty spaces to hold the corpses in position and even more of it laid worked into flesh where needed. Of the two of them Will's eyes were drawn first to the man lying nearly prone on his back over a block of black stone, legs stopping abruptly mid thigh, bloodily severed. One of the dead hands hung supported by red threads so that it almost seemed to be reaching for the muscled, headless body that held a triton stitched into the grasping, rigor mortis locked, hands of the other corpse that completed the image. Blue cloth wrapped around the torso of the upright body, draping such that it was almost hiding the rebar that pierced the leading leg, securing it to the stone block.

Will sucked in a shaking breath.

"Will?"

Hannibal just watched as Will walked around, eyed the second strand of rebar, strategically placed to support a missing leg. He heard another hitch in Will's breath. Will's eyes were blown wide and his breathing was coming in small gasps when he returned to where he had started and Hannibal could see his face..

"Pitchfork?"

Hannibal closed his eyes and grit his teeth, wheeling and pointing at the intruder. He didn't raise his voice, knowing that *would* startle Will and yank him fully out of the scene he was reliving. Hannibal bore down on the BPD officer and grabbed the idiot by his wrist.

"Officer. Get. Out." He hissed tightly, "Let the profiler work, and for your information that is a trident. Three prongs, sea fishing." Hannibal growled lowly, doing his best to let Will take in everything without some rude interloper bothering him.

Will bit back a smirk at Hannibal's annoyance, assuming it was the agent's ignorance that had made the man irritated.

"But…"

"The profiler works best *without* interruptions, or with those that know how to let him work. Agent Gamsby?"

"Doctor?"

"Please point this officer at something else… like… cameras perchance?" Hannibal suggested. Gamsby nodded and gestured for the officer to follow him. Hannibal took up a guard position at the entryway, holding up a warning hand when Beverly and Price walked towards him.

"Will behind you?"

"Hello, Ms. Katz. Yes. Will is studying the scene, I had to chase off an officer."

"At least our team knows to let Will work. He drifting the edges of the scene, Doctor?" Jimmy asked. Hannibal arched an eyebrow.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Will, he tends to circle in. Starts out on an outer edge and drifts in in closer circles or arcs, depending on how the scene's set up in there. Just a thing he does."

"Then yes, he is. I have my own theories, but would rather wait, and not cloud him."

"You've always been respectful about that, Hannibal. It's something classical. There's a fucking trident in his hands, two bodies, connected with red thread again. You and Beverly better get in there, Jimmy. Where's Zee?"

“He drew short straw, two bodies?”

“Yeah, and one of them is… kinda chewed up?”

“We’ve got *teeth* marks?” Jimmy asked, perking up slightly. Will shook his head from where he had looked up from inspecting the wound that removed the left leg from the fish. He caught himself considering the corpse in those terms, filed the automatic association for later deeper consideration, and stood up slowly.

“Chunks missing, and he didn’t seem picky about what he was taking this time, or putting it back as neatly. I’ll take Doctor Lecter with me and go find Jack. Because he’s going to want to hear this.”

“If you get to Zee before he leaves the van, tell him we need two body bags, please?”

“Actually, I can go find Mr. Zeller and let him know… Will?” Hannibal startled as Will had soundlessly appeared next to his shoulder.

“Yeah, actually that works, thank you, Hannibal.” Will agreed. Hannibal stepped aside and let Will walk past him. He only watched as Will paused for a moment and tipped his head just *listening* for Jack’s distinctive bellow. Hannibal looked in the same direction as Will before he nodded to Agent Gamsby and moved to go do as he had been asked. Will had seen his design.

~*~*~

“Jack, this… God, this is brutal but artistic at the same time. He arranged and balanced that trident so that it almost stabs the legless guy lying below him. Like, seriously, it looks like the points should be in his throat, but a clear strand of fishing line hovers it, so it doesn’t.”

"Are you... impressed?" Jack asked, tone and expression set into disgust

"I mean... aren't you, just a little bit?” Will asked, gesturing, “This took some *skill,* Jack."

“Two people are dead! He removed *legs*, Will. And you are *impressed* by… by…” Will suddenly realised that he had said something wildly inappropriate and that any normal person would have been staring at him just like Jack was.

Will snarled after a moment of confusion passed. “You want to hear my insight on the Ripper, you are going to get some admiration for the process too… it’s *part* of him, Jack! If you don’t want me doing this, then don’t ask me what I’m seeing!”

Jack scowled. Will was just glad they were in the manager’s office and the door was shut, because Jack started yelling. Will had yet to raise his voice. *“It scares people, Will!”*

“He takes *pride* in his work, Jack. It’s there, swirling under the surface of the kill like that really fancy orange glaze Hannibal puts on his duck confit.” Will said, shrugging slightly as he turned away as Hannibal made a tiny sound of amusement before he could stop himself.

“Do you find something… amusing, Doctor Lecter?”

“Just the fact that Will finds that glaze ‘fancy’ is all. I can give you the recipe later, Will. You still seem to be… mulling something over about the scene.”

“Yeah, which deity is the water one? In Greek myth. Because, I am remembering some public broadcasts from childhood about famous statues, and that’s… in my head.”

Hannibal sighed and rubbed at his nose in exasperation. “Eventually I will manage to instill *some* culture in my friends.”

Will laughed, “Jack? Has Hannibal managed yet, with you?”

“You remembered what one of the dishes he served you was called. You are doing better than I am. Look, I understand you are stressed, Will, but the others… don’t get it.”

“Yeah but you *asked*, Jack.”

“Will? Your answer is Poseidon.”

“Oh, I couldn’t remember if the right name was Poseidon or Neptune.”

“It depends on if you are wanting the Greek or the Roman deity, Will.”

“Which is which again, Doctor? I’m too busy trying to process why the guy missing his legs is reaching for the one missing one of his and holding a spear threateningly on him, so, sorry?”

“The planets are named for the Roman versions, Will.”

"Planets," Jack commented, "The first one was looking at the sun." He murmured.

"Sun’s not a planet, Jack." Will said bluntly.

“It is in classical astrology, Will.” Hannibal said quietly and Will glared at him. They both knew that was a dead lead.

“And she was *looking* at the cross. Weren't you standing in Hannibal’s office when I *said* that, Jack?”

A sudden knock on the door and Zeller leaning in without bothering to wait for permission froze everyone in place.

“Will? Did you miss the flowers in the legless guy’s hand?”

“Flowers?”

“Okay, I think you need to see this then.”

Will followed Zeller and nodded briefly to Price as he circled to where Price was pointing. He dropped to a crouch, realizing that the nearly invisible fishing line was keeping the fingers of a hand cupped together and in place, holding a small bundle of flowers and other plant material in the palm of the legless man’s free hand.

“Some form of lily, those are ferns… not sure what the blue thing is… Just make sure they are photographed from every angle, because I don’t think it will hold together once we move it from where it’s set, okay?” Will suggested. Price nodded.

Will stepped back and just took it all in again.

“Will?”

“It's another offering. The one prone is… offering himself, Jack. To the deity standing above him. This still has the feel of a statue, I just… don’t have it right now.”

“But it’s something classical?”

“It fits the Ripper. I don’t know why he picked *these* bodies, other than… he thinks his vision of Neptune is perfect.”

“Has anybody seen our Neptune’s head?” Beverly asked, eyeing the body critically.

“Um…”

Will looked over at the unfamiliar voice, saw the way the cop was going pale and stepped over, sick bag at the ready. Will just sighed and awkwardly patted his shoulder, “First scene?”

“Yeah… this…”

“You learn to handle it. Some of us carry bags, others don’t eat til the end of their shifts.” Will looked over at Jack, who shrugged. “You’ll get better at it, and? You didn’t fuck up the scene, now, go on. Get some air, it’ll help.”

“Thanks for preserving the scene, Will.”

“Welcome, Bev. Jack?”

“Go on, Will. I think we’ve gotten what we can from this, for now.” Will didn’t move until the door closed back behind Bev. Jack frowned at him as Will steeled himself and drew himself to his full height.

“Okay. I’m going to say this *once* , Jack. If you *ever* decide to *intrude* on a closed door

discussion between Hannibal and myself again, I am *done* . Do you understand me?" Will snarled. Jack blinked, taken aback.

"Will, it's not like --"

"No. You stepped into what could have been a very private or intense session, Jack. What would Bella have done if you'd walked in while she was talking about National Security Matters and you interrupted?" Will demanded, no longer caring if he was letting Jack get a word in, he had held his tongue long enough.

"Bella wouldn't disclose something like that to a psychiatrist." Jack answered pointedly and Will scowled. "And if you are discussing work it shouldn't be anything I don't already know."

"Do you want to watch me piss and count how many times I shake it when I'm finished too?" Will snapped back, finally at the end of his tether. "No? Then stay the hell out of my therapy sessions."

"Will! Your tone is entirely--"

"If you don't like my *tone* , *Agent Crawford* , then keep your nose out of other people's business!"

"Will... you really shouldn't speak to me like that." Hannibal almost stepped forward at the warning in Jack's tone until he saw the flash of more than just anger from Will.

"What are you going to do? *Fire me?* Do you have any idea how lucky you are that you don't already have my letter of resignation?"

"Now, let's not be hasty..."

Will merely curled his lip. Hannibal placed a hand on his arm and Will glanced down at the touch and nodded once.

"Will is entirely correct, Jack. You intruded where you were not invited. And that was *rude* ." Hannibal murmured, dark eyes flashing.

"Frankly I had more important things on my mind than-"

"Than what Jack? Doctor-patient confidentiality? My mental well-being. Then again. You've never rated that highly, have you?"

"Will..." Hannibal murmured quietly, just enough of a soothing note in his tone to stop Will working himself into an entirely hysterical state. "It's not like I --"

"No, Jack. You fucking *use* me for your benefit. Hell, the fact I'm doing this with a god damned *Ripper* scene a room away... yes, *now* is the time to say this. Either you respect the process that keeps me able to do these scenes for you and respect doctor-patient privilege or you never darken my door again."

"You can't just say something like that Will, lives are at stake."

"Yes I can. Because if I don't, *mine* is. You're killing me Jack. This job is *killing* me. I told you I didn't want it. I *told* you I wasn't interested and you dragged me into it anyway."

Will ignored Hannibal's impressed expression. He'd been saying the same thing to Will for years at this point and hadn't been convinced the man was listening until now.

"Will... you can't be serious, this scene had to have --"

"I'm as serious as a damn heart attack. Jack? I'm as serious as the *encephalitis we* missed because you were driving me so damn hard. I'm still getting yearly checks for shit like that." Will snarled, ignoring the horrified stares from some of the other FBI agents and regular police. This had been coming for *years* .

"We'll discuss this later." Jack said, glancing around and realizing the others were staring avidly.

"We'll discuss it *now* , Jack. I'm sick of you treating me like a goddamned child. You need me a lot more than I need *you* . You better start remembering that." Will huffed and pointed back towards where the gruesome scene was laid out, "That in there? He's not done. There will be *at least* one more. He hasn't pulled enough, he does three *distinct* displays, Jack. So, either you respect what this fucking *takes* for me to do it, or you don't come calling when the last of his sounder lands in your lap."

"Fine." Jack bit out.

"I mean it, Jack, this is my line, understood?"

"I said yes. Do you want to take another look before they dismantle it?"

"Not particularly. I think I got everything the first walk through? But that's *my* job. I'll look *again* . Clear the room. I want time alone in there to look it over. And *I mean* no interruptions, Jack." Will declared, gaze intense as he fixed it on Jack.

Will paced around the stone block, peered at the rebar holding the Neptune in place and eyed the other man lying splayed beneath him. The sheer *sense* of intimacy from this display had his skin prickling. This was… different. Starkly odd in its sexual expressiveness, coming from the Ripper. Will could agree with Hannibal's earlier assessment, the Ripper was eager to court his…

"Will?" Beverly called. Will turned and frowned, losing the train of thought.

"Yeah?"

"You look like you need a drink. I've got water?" Beverly held up a bottle and Will smiled and took it, wetting his dry throat. She merely cocked her head, staring at the scene.

“It’s… different, this time. Not as… cold?” Beverly murmured. Will nodded.

"Yeah, I see that too. He's not just looking for a courtship now. He's getting closer."

“You’ve been standing in one place for ten minutes, Will. I think Doctor Lecter is getting worried.” Beverly murmured.

“Trying to… piece this together. The flowers, the pose, the fact that spear should be through our guy’s throat… and he’s… older. I think that’s deliberate.”

"The age of the victim is deliberate?"

"Seems to be. Maybe he's letting the person he's courting know that he's older somehow? That he's not just looking for a fling."

"You think we need to update our profile?"

"We've always put him somewhere in his early to mid forties, or at least... I have?" Will said, staring down at the body laid out before him, seeming to ignore the one standing above.

"That makes sense, you've got to be pretty fit to move bodies the way he does." Bev agreed. "But you think he's older."

"I think he's too clever to be leaving clues that he's a surgeon if he is one. Maybe he's retired? Or changed jobs?""Could have. Something that would help him maintain... the strength he'd need?"

"Such as?" Will asked, taking another sip and stepping to the side, shifting his attention to the standing figure as he let his eyes rake up and down the fairly impressive frame. This was someone who should have been able to put up a good fight.

"Something with heavy lifting... nurse, orderly...." Beverly shrugged.

"Yeah, try a tox screen on this one for sedatives, see if the Ripper gave him something to keep him quiet…” Will mused. “Medical job gives him access to medical supplies... Where is the logic in going from surgeon to orderly though?"

"Maybe we're looking for people who couldn't hack the stress?" Bev offered.

"But... doctors usually do sutures, right?" Will asked, eyeing the red thread yet again.

"Yes."

"Just because he's trained as a doctor, doesn't mean he is working as one..." Will said slowly. "Damn."

"What?"

"The list of suspects just got really, really, long." Will said, a groan slipping from his throat even as the words left his mouth.

"Jack's not going to like that..."

"Can't help it, if that's how this is pointing, Bev."

"So we think... Someone with medical experience but not necessarily using it?"

"Exactly."

“Okay, I think Zee wants to get things moved… do you…” Beverly hedged. Will smiled slightly.

“No, I think this is all I’m going to get from this, at the moment. Thank you, Bev.”

Will nodded and Hannibal seemed to appear out of nowhere, gentle smile on his face and keys in hand.

“Allow me to take you back to your vehicle, Will.”

"Do i have a choice, Doctor Lecter?" Will quipped amusedly, noting the air of concern on the man.

“Of course, Will. I was just under the impression you wished to return to your dogs tonight, and it is no trouble.” Hannibal murmured. Will nodded. “I brought you after all.”

Will smiled softly, “Thank you, Doctor Lecter.”

Will noticed that Jack was conspicuously absent as other agents filed past him and Hannibal. He counted it as a small victory and allowed Hannibal to escort him from the gallery, a hand solicitously on his elbow.

Chapter Five ~ March 30, 2010

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for brief discussions of the Holocaust/shoah, brief discussion/commentary on homophobia, and brief commentary on racism

Will was seriously questioning why he had gotten out of bed that morning. His head was throbbing already, and Jack was yelling, again , even as they stood in the confines of the Quantico Morgue. Will shook out a pair of aspirin and swallowed them dry, ignoring the concerned looks from Beverly and Brian.

"Who cares what the flowers say, does it help us catch him?!"

"Jack, everything he leaves us... or the one he's communicating with, helps us understand what is going on.” Will winced again, “Now, are we sure those are blue?"

"Why wouldn't they be?"

"I don't know, it just doesn't feel right." Will mused aloud.

"Why? The Ripper is coming off as frigid?" Zeller asked.

"That's why it doesn't feel like it fits.” Will said, rubbing at his temples, “calla lilies are beauty."

"That's not a calla, those are white." Zeller said, pointing at the small bundle that had rested in the right hand photo of the prone corpse.

"Callas don't just come in white, Zee. Question is... is that black or purple? Seems too dark to be purple... so if it's black..." Price trailed off and pointed at the bouquet with a pen.

"Did you just Google flower languages?"

"I did. Jimmy has a book, somewhere around here? We know the Ripper likes his flower messages, I wanted to be sure we're right but the colours of this one matter." Bev said, shrugging

"How so, Bev?" Will asked, hands shoved into jean pockets, leaned back on his heels, but gaze fixed on the flowers.

"According to this," she glanced at the screen, "different tones of apology?"

"For the lily?"

"No for the flower ball. Zee? You said it was a hydrangea?"

"Yeah, but... Will? Does the entire set up read like a rejection?" Zeller waved one of the crime scene prints. Will plucked it from Zeller's waving fingers and stared at it again.

"No. Same idea as last time... fascinated... putting his lovestruck idiot above him?" Will frowned.

"What?" Came from three different people.

"Oh, sorry. Hannibal and I must have talked about it at some point. We were theorizing that the Ripper set up the first scene with the crucifixion as part of the scene. Hannibal mentioned that one can't touch the divine."

"So he's what? Reaching out to someone who he can't get near?" Beverly asked, frowning.

"Oh... found it...." Price murmured before he hit print.

An image popped out of the printer and Will snagged it before shuffling through various photos of the display until he found one that was close to matching.

He laid them down side by side, one a statue, the other the crime scene.

"And the flowers were in the okay, half man half fish... merman?" Will muttered, peering down at the image of the statue.

"Right or left?" Beverly asked.

"Right hand, left is... oh, not quite touching, but reaching. Yeah, I think Hannibal was right..."

"I sometimes am, Will."

Will jumped and scowled.

"Don't do that!" He muttered, annoyed and Hannibal chuckled quietly.

"Hello Doctor Lecter."

"Hello Ms. Katz, Mr. Price, Zeller. What is Will admitting I am right about?"

“That this *is* another love note from the Ripper. Positioning matters, as always with how the Ripper does this. What is the name of this piece, Jimmy?”

“Neptune Calming the Waves. It’s a triton at the god’s feet. So that makes our older corpse the stand-in for the triton.”

"And what exactly is that supposed to suggest?" Zeller asked

Hannibal merely watched as Will and the three forensic techs began bouncing ideas off one another in rapid succession, the way Will and Beverly had nearly a week before.

"Well, the Ripper used red thread to connect the bodies, but they don't touch. He also took three of the four legs on offer, at least partially." Will murmured, pacing back and forth.

"Took the lungs out of the triton along with the heart, and, honestly, most of the triton's back is missing... took everything between shoulder blades and his ass, but put the skin back together. As in, he cut open the back, yanked everything out that way, and then sutured up the flesh, using the same pattern that was on our first body ."

"So?"

"To echo Mr. Zeller from last time, prime cuts. He took what wouldn't be... needed, perhaps?" Hannibal asked.

"Then why is our Neptune still intact, minus a leg and his head?" Jack asked, pointing towards the body, "That's a lot of meat right there."

"It's the representation..." Will said quietly. "The Neptune is the person he's trying to represent."

"Trying?"

"Trying. I don't think our Ripper knows yet, exactly who he's courting, but... hell, the sadism is contained here... few marks on the Neptune. Too many to count on the Triton." Will shook his head.

"Why does that matter?"

"He *respects* whomever he's trying to court, Jack. So he's not going to treat the representative like simple meat." Will snapped.

"So, he's using someone he doesn't respect, to represent someone he does, and treating them with some kind of restraint to show that? What kind of sense is that?" Zeller asked.

"The sense of a psychopath?" Will murmured, shrugging. “I can see the logic, look at this pig I elevated for you, it is but a poor imitation of you, accept this offering. It's almost religious."

Everyone just stared at Will for a moment. Will dragged a hand through his hair, "What? That's what I see."

"We've got the tox back, Jack... he drugged the Neptune. That might be why... he didn't take much." Zeller said, flipping through the report as it spat out of the printer.

"Does that fit, Will?" Beverly asked, realizing that Will was staring down at the muscled corpse.

"He was going for beauty... an ideal physique... by which standard though..."

"By his?"

"Or by renaissance standards? Is he going for accuracy or meaning?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Could he not subdue this one, without drugging him? Or did he drug him to prevent marks, to preserve the look?" Zeller muttered, rubbing at his chin.

Will glanced at Zeller and something passed over his face, a fleeting expression that Hannibal knew he would review later. Will walked over to one of the tables and dug around in his bag for a moment before he fished out a hard covered slim journal and started flipping through the pages.

"The Ripper's sixth victim. Weighed about what that guy does. So, I don't think he needed the drugs to do it. And we know he's strong. He's moving the bodies himself. He's certainly in shape."

"You..."

"I transcribed the basic features of each of the victims... name, age, sex, height, weight, eye color. So I have a quick reference for it."

"Nothing on race?" Jack asked.

"Hasn't seemed relevant yet, Jack."

"Not at all?"

"Doesn't seem to be any link, he tends to go for white folk but most killers in majority white areas do." Will mused.

"So, it's an abundance of opportunities, not... a prejudice?" Beverly asked. Will tipped his head to the side and stepped closer to the Neptune. His hands hovered above the body.

"Perhaps... whatever selection technique he has... maybe white folk are more likely to... tick his boxes?"

"How so?"

"He likes his renaissance art, they did a lot in white marble."

"So he's picking them for the... look?" Jack asked, tone probing. Will made an agreeing noise and moved from Neptune over to the Triton.

"Maybe he's just never met a black person he wanted to kill?" Bev mused and Will bit his lip amusedly at the expression on Jack's face. His eyes met Hannibal's and he glanced away.

"Well, if that is the case, he has certainly never met you then, Jack." Hannibal added and Jack glared at him as the quiet titters travelled around the room.

“I’m sure far more people who have met me want me dead than don’t, doctor,” Jack shot back with a smirk and a glance at Will that might almost have been an actual apology, almost. “So that doesn’t narrow it down, what does?”

“He likes his mythology. Did we miss something with our first scene of this sounder? Was there anything … myth related that I didn’t catch?” Will asked, tapping on an entry in the notebook and looking up.

Beverly frowned and Will just listened to the printer whirr. Zeller handed Will a photo from the first scene and Will laid it down next to the second scene.

“How often do we have somebody lying on an altar in art?”

“A lot,” Hannibal said, “depending upon the type of altar.”

“Catholic.” Will said and Hannibal’s expression flickered. “Or maybe not…” Will murmured. “Ok, can i borrow someone’s computer?” Will asked and Bev gestured him over. He typed frantically for a few minutes before letting out a growl of frustration.

“Maybe she’s a sacrifice?” Bev offered, “You know, human sacrifice on the altar of love?”

Will froze and turned to Bev slowly.

“But then-” he started typing again, “This one was based on a sculpture, right, and we know the Ripper likes to base his stuff on artwork.” Will said rapidly as he scrolled. “Sacrifice in art maybe?”

“That is a broad range of possible subjects. Will, Catholic saints, the many and varied depictions of the Crucifixion of Jesus, sacrificial altars of prechristian origin.”

“No, he wouldn’t have offered his deity an animal, she’s not designed to be anything but the most special offering, something rare and exalted.” Hannibal forced down a smile at how well Will understood him.

“Perhaps…” he mused, ought he grant Will the boon as he was trying so hard to find the answer? He leaned down over the photographs again and tilted his head as if considering. “Perhaps the wax isn’t blood?” He suggested and Will looked at him across the room.

“What do you think?”

“There are several almost exclusively catholic practices that this killer may have felt the need to use in his symbolism.”

“Such as?” Jack asked, leaning forward.

“The Holy Spirit as a concept is often rendered visually as flames.” Hannibal suggested and Will froze.

“A burnt offering… where have i heard that before?”

Bev coughed quietly and Will turned to her.

“What?”

“Burnt offering Will, it’s a Jewish tradition it's also…” She pulled a face and Hannibal stepped in neatly.

“Forgive me, Ms Katz, it is also the origin of the term used to describe the *Shoah* in Europe.”

It was Brian who glanced between them, confused.

“The what?” he demanded, expression one of utter confusion. Bev’s jaw ticked slightly as she appeared to be gritting her teeth and forcing the words out.

“The Holocaust, Brian, he means the Holocaust.”

“Oh.” Brian paused and glanced at Will.

“No, that doesn’t feel right, this isn’t… why would he make a reference to that?”

“Maybe *he's* Jewish?” Jack cut in and Bev groaned.

“We’ll if he is, he’s not Kosher.” She quipped and smirked.

“Was the nurse?” Will asked and Jimmy reached for a file, opened it then shook his head.

“Nope.”

“Ok, so let's get off that angle. What else is there in burnt offerings?” Will asked the room at large.

“They are made to… please a Deity.” Jimmy murmured, clicking away on his computer as Bev paced.

“I don’t think… This is a *courtship* .” Will stressed, “it’s going to be some kind of love story.” Will paused. “Anything in art or anything ringing any bells, Hannibal?” He asked after a moment of thoughtful silence. Hannibal half shook his head, he’d given them enough to be getting on with.

“Okay, female… maybe he’s telling us to look to history, any famous deaths at church altars?” A room of blank faces. “Any famous sacrifices on any kind of altar? Something in a love story- probably a tragedy given that they’re dead?”

“Romeo and Juliet?”

“No, that was poison and a knife,” Will muttered and Hannibal looked surprised. “What, *I’m a professor, I read!”*

“So, we’ve got a love story, a sacrifice, an altar, and fire… Which of these things doesn’t

belong?" Jimmy grumbled, grabbing an expo marker off the rack, shoving papers and photos aside and scrawling it directly on the metal table.

"Wait... " Will said. "Sacrifice, Romeo and Juliet, maybe it's not sacrifice after all." He said slowly. "Maybe it's suicide. Star crossed lovers, the separation from a loved one…" He looked up expectantly and then huffed and started typing on Bev's computer again. They were all watching him, astounded.

"Antony and Cleopatra, it's more Shakespeare but… no, that was snakes and burial alive…" he typed again and waited for the page to load. "Anyone heard of Dido?" He asked as he clicked the images tab on the search engine and froze. "Nevermind, it's Dido. Look." he said, almost breathless from the exertion of thinking so hard out loud.

"Queen Dido?" Bev asked and Will nodded. "Wasn't that some old myth about…"

"Carthage," Will said as he was reading. "It's from the *Aeneid* ," he said and then looked away from the computer. "Funnily enough I read that one too, why didn't I think of it?" he demanded darkly to himself.

"Will! Stop muttering to yourself and tell us." Jack snapped and Will glared balefully at him.

"Can I not enjoy not being the smartest person in the room for three seconds? This is a brilliant design, Jack, it's so intricate, it's *perfect* ."

Bev let out an annoyed sound and Will shot her an apologetic look at the insult to her intelligence.

"Queen Dido and Aeneas got married and he had to leave, she couldn't reach him…" Will said. "So she threw herself on a funeral pyre," he finished as the printer whirred to life and he nodded at it. "Tell me the first one wasn't that, right there" he asked pointing at the paper Jack was pulling from the machine.

"What is this?"

"That is the *Death of Dido,* by Joseph Stallaert." Will said. "It's also nearly perfectly what we had in that church if the loose arm fell after he left."

"Our Triton has been identified. Willis Lars. Sheet is... long." Zeller said, eyeing his tablet for a moment.

"Oh?"

"Rape, murder, prostitution, the usual things we find with a hardened criminal."

"He's never done that before, picked someone with a rap sheet." Jack mused.

"That we know of." Will said sharply.

"Will... he only takes his three..."

"No, he *displays* three, Jack. This is his *Renaissance* . He kills them via surgical incision, removes what he wants, and then lets them bleed out for his displays. We don't know if his MO shifts..." Will trailed off.

"Will?" Hannibal prompted. “Joseph Staller is a little later for the Renaissance, despite being heavily influenced by the Raphaelite style.” Will nodded.

"What he said. Wait- what?”

“Stallaert was a painter from the nineteenth century Will, a man one might consider closer to the neoclassicism or his time than the earlier renaissance.”

“Do you just… know every painter, ever?” Will asked, aghast and Hannibal smirked.

“I studied in Florence, Will, art will always be a huge part of my life and my formative education.” Hannibal offered and Will smiled before returning to his document, the moment of understanding between them held precious as it seared itself into a tiny corner of Hannibal’s mind palace and sunk into Will’s stream.

“Three lower legs, a set of lungs, a heart, and most of that guy's back... how much meat would that be?"

"The limbs? Probably three to four pounds, total weight. Whatever he took from the back could be eight to twelve pounds, So he's gathered, let us estimate, sixteen more pounds of meat, so he's near twenty?" Hannibal offered.

"Okay... but usually by this point... he's over thirty plus... I don't think this is his full sounder, Jack."

"A lot of meat, is he eating alone?" Beverly asked.

"Don't think he plans to, not this time." Will murmured, gaze switching to Lars’ corpse and then back to the still unidentified Neptune.

"Huh?" Jack asked, appearing queasy.

"Um... anyone still curious about the flowers?" Price asked, seeming to grab everyone’s attention with one question.

"Yeah?" Will asked.

"Grass was braided to hold the ferns and flowers together."

"Any meaning to that or just convenience?" Jack asked

"There's meaning, but I don't think it fits... mystery and elegance... talking about his deity?" Price pointed to the black lily with a pen, "Wanting to know more about his deity," a gesture to the hydrangea. "Still not sure about the fern, but the grass? Grass is typically used to show that the giver... submits?"

Everyone in the room just stared at Jimmy who shrugged.

"How do you even?"

"My mother was in the WI," Jimmy shrugged, "you learn things like that when she has every housewife in the county for a dinner party."

"So... physically?" Zeller quipped.

"Physically, emotionally..." Jimmy paused. "Yeah, sexually too."

“You are telling me that this… bunch of flowers and bits is basically an invitation to who the hell knows... That the Ripper wants to…” Jack trailed off and just glared at the flowers.

“We are pretty sure the Ripper is a man. So yes. That’s how I’d read it, Jack. He wants to submit to his deity on all the primal levels. This is him showing his belly.” Will murmured, shrugging one shoulder.

Jack seemed to stalk out in a huff. Will only watched him go.

“Will? Why don’t you think he’s done? There have been three bodies…” Beverly asked.

“But not enough meat.” Will responded before he nodded once and walked away, bag over his shoulder and notebook in hand. “Gimmie a minute?”

"Anybody else suddenly very... uncomfortable?" Zeller asked, frowning slightly.

"Why, Mr. Zeller?"

"The Ripper has a sex life, i'm discomforted by this."

"Serial Killer, potential cannibal, but still human. Sex is part of life for most human beings, Mr. Zeller." Hannibal pointed out, voice becoming soothing.

"But..." Zeller shuddered and Hannibal schooled himself neutral, even as a brief thought passed through his brain... if his Admirer was not comfortable with an intimate physical relationship, it would not be a hardship... but it did cross Brian Zeller off his list.

"What is it that concerns you..."

Zeller fixed Hannibal with an irritated look. Will stalked back into the room and consulted a report.

"Look I'm as open minded as the next guy, but the idea of the Ripper being well..."

Will's expression flickered.

"Sexually submissive?" Hannibal offered.

"Yeah, I mean, it's the Ripper you kind of expect.... More dominance?"

Will looked up from the report he was skimming, pen in one hand, tapping idly against the table. Will sighed.

"Why should he be, Brian? He kills. There's nothing more dominant than that. He decides who lives and who dies. He has control where he needs it. So what if he gives up that control in bed?" Will rolled his shoulders, face bland.

"So what?" Brian parroted.

"Yes. So what. I'm frankly surprised that Jack didn't say anything. I mean, I don't think he's phobic... but it... doesn't sit right with him."

Hannibal let his gaze survey the profiler. A stray drop or two of water clung to the collar of the blue flannel shirt he wore. He blinked once, slowly and tucked the image away for later.

"Does the idea fit whatever psychological profile you've built of the Ripper, Doctor Lecter?" Beverly asked, seeming to jar Will from his staring contest with Zeller.

"As Will said, the Ripper has control in other aspects of his life... though, I wouldn't qualify this as a deviance, Mr. Zeller."

Brian startled, "I..."

"Hannibal has ears like a bat, Brian. I can imagine what you just said." Will's lip curled.

"Will? Do you need anything else for your profile?"

"I have a few more pieces, Hannibal. Do you have what you need?"

Hannibal nodded.

"Good. Now... I'm dragging you to lunch."

Hannibal blinked in confusion but allowed Will to herd him out of the FBI morgue and followed when he was led back to Will's office.

"Trout with lemon and rice. And a spring salad." Will said, sliding a warm container across the desk to Hannibal, who blinked in surprise and pleasure.

Hannibal opened the container and took the fork that was offered, eyeing the wild rice with some interest.

"While not as fancy as what you might expect, made from fresh, including the rice."

"This is very good Will," Hannibal praised.

"Really? I'm taking that as a compliment from you Doctor Lecter."

"And? You can tell Alana I'm eating, since she mentioned you were giving a guest lecture for her class?"

"Has she been... bothering you?"

"Between you and Alana, you won't let me starve." Will muttered. Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

"I'm wondering if you two coordinate like a wolf pack. You weren't here yesterday, she was. She brought me this amazing cinnamon roll...." Will trailed off and laughed quietly at the disgusted look that Hannibal didn't bother to hide.

"Do you wish to starve?"

"No but... Doesn't mean I want to eat constantly either. Though I appreciate the effort."

"Alana and I both are the sort to care for our friends by physical gestures."

"Oh, so I'm not the only one you try to feed?"

"You, Alana, Jack... our friends down in forensics..." Hannibal smiled.

"You bring them food?"

"Any time I have a dinner party, there are always left overs, I bring them to the lab."

"What else do you have today, Will?"

"Hand back this round of papers, pick up the next set... and have them back out by next Wednesday."

"Will I see you for our regular session on Friday?"

Will bit his lip and shook his head. "I want to go over the Ripper profile again. Trying to see if... this angle will shift what we know far enough to give us something... else. If I really need some advice, I do have your number."

“Very well. Have a good evening, Will. This really was delicious. Thank you.” Hannibal murmured. Will smiled when he noticed that the entire container had been consumed.

~*~*~

Hannibal arrived home and breathed in the scent of lavender. There, sitting on the entryway table was a neatly wrapped, plain, brown paper package. Hannibal could taste lavender on the air again. His Admirer had come calling.

Hannibal moved to the table and studied the nearly flat package with interest. A small piece of white paper caught his eye.

since you love the classics, beautiful .

Hannibal plucked up the note and shook his head. His Admirer had *obviously* seen his most recent offering. Carrying the box into the kitchen, he used a paring knife to slit the tape and

eagerly unwrapped his present.

The package underneath was black, and fake velvet. He grimaced slightly, cheap packaging. But he recognized the brand. He picked up the box, leaving the wrappings where they lay, and stepped into his study, before setting it onto his desk and then opening the lid fully.

Gold gleamed as he examined the pen laid out in front of him. He stroked a finger over the pen before plucking it from the confines and spun it gently through his fingers. Montblanc made overpriced pens… but this…

He uncapped the pen and carefully began taking the pen apart. He pulled open the right drawer and fished out his cleaning supplies. After a quick clean, he pulled out his jeweler's loupe and eyed the nib. Running his thumbnail gently across the back of the tines and fiddled with it slightly, before he took one of the cartridges sent with it and slipped it into place. Then, reaching for one of his favorite notebooks he added a note to Will’s journal about this evening. After a few lines against the page, he examined the pen with a fond expression.

Only once he was certain the pen was comfortable and the nib wrote to his taste did he pick up and examine the lid. Da Vinci's *Leda and the Swan* peered up at him in miniature. Hannibal smiled.

Chapter Six ~ April 4, 2010

Chapter Notes

> Please be aware that this chapter has thematic artwork embedded within the body of the text which some may find graphic. I hope they enhance your experience of this story. ~ Both artworks were created by HissyTheDangerNoodle.

The Ripper waited exactly three days before a corpse was found kneeling with his heart ripped from his chest and offered. And, like some horror device out of myth, there was an eagle involved.

Will eased his way past the mob of journalists and police milling around, ducked under the bright scene tape and paused as he crested a hill. Nestled in a hollow, flanked by trees in eerie display spots of white framed in bright green grass, a single splash of deep red marring the hands of an upright, kneeling corpse.

Will blinked again and suddenly Zeller, Price, and Beverly were there, working on various bodies and parts of bodies. He made his way down the trail of bent grasses, easing down the hill, feeling the dew soak into his jeans as he moved.

"Is this.... All of these are the same time of death?" Will asked, pausing next to Brian who looked up. Zeller leaned back on his haunches, thermometer in one gloved hand.

"They are all temping about the same, Will. Though, I think the fucking eagle may have messed up whatever his message was. The torsos are empty..."

"Hearts missing?"

" *Everything* missing."

"Then..."

"At least six hours old. Our kneeler was killed at about the same time... that one is intact, except for the heart... which an eagle landed on. Also, the puddle of puke next to the kneeler is from the person that owns the eagle."

Will looked around, ignoring Zeller, Price, and even Beverly bending over the kneeling body.

"Why do you think the eagle ruined the message?"

"It was eating the *heart* in the corpse's hands, Will." Zeller spluttered.

"It was lured down, Will. There's a mess of feathers here too. Some sort of small bird was tied to this one's fingers with some string..." Beverly trailed off and shrugged, gesturing to the blue threads.

"So the motion would cause the eagle to strike...." Will murmured, carefully stepping around the puddle of sick and eyeing the talon marks and fluttering feathers. “It was a pigeon. The bait bird was a pigeon. I think the eagle *was* part of the message. Gamsby!”

“Yes, Professor?”

“Is the person with the eagle still here?”

“Yeah? The bird is fucking huge, by the way.”

“I think I need to talk to them first. Hold this until I come back?” Will jerked a thumb over his shoulder to encompass the entire scene. Gamsby nodded and took up a guard position at the top of the hill, arms folded, glaring through sunglasses down at the parking lot littered with various first responder vehicles and a milling pack of journalists. Will felt his lip curl as he spotted Freddie Lounds distinct red curls amongst the throng.

Will eyed the black box and the dark skinned young man shaking and grey next to it.

“Hi, my name is Will, and I’m with the FBI, I have a few questions for you.”

“S-sure. Yeah. I just want to get Enna home and out of the rig.”

“What’s your name?

“Jake Ranconi.”

“Okay, I’ll try and make this quick, Jake. Do you normally bring Enna out here at this time?”

“Yeah. I tend to fly her in the mornings, she usually takes a rabbit or some small bird. Do you need to… like collect stuff off her?”

“No. I just need to get an idea from you. What did you see?”

“She stooped after something on the ground, over in the hollow. I didn’t see it until I went down the hill, they can sometimes get bound up in their kill, so I wanted to make sure she wasn’t hurt. And then… *t-that* . She was sitting on the ground i-in front of… at first? I thought that… I yelled at a dead guy… and then I got her unbound from the string and… I got --”

The man went grey. Will handed over a sick bag and simply waited it out.

“S-sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, here, have some water. I carry the bags because some scenes make me

throw up. Every Agent and cop loses their stomach at one scene or another, just means you are human, man."

"Oh."

"Do the cops have your info?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I don't know if my colleagues will need you… but I'll send an agent over, just to make sure you and the bird get home. Stress isn't good for them."

"No, no it's not." The man agreed, skin still ashen and clutching the bottle of water Will had produced from his own bag.

Will motioned to one of the other agents as he climbed the hill. She trotted up to him, expression grim.

"Talk to Jack, see if we can turn the guy with the eagle loose. That bird needs to be out of that box, it's good for transport, but they need more room than that."

"Sure, Professor. You know Agent Crawford got pulled out of church for this?"

"I do now. Oh fuck, it's *Easter* Sunday…" Will groaned. The woman nodded once and peeled off to go find Jack, while Will climbed the hill again. Gamsby met him at the top.

When a reckless riot of sound screamed out from Gamsby's pocket, Will registered the words and paled, gaze snapping to the scene.

"Fuck, sorry… I thought I had that turned off…" Lucas muttered, scrambling for his phone and muting it, flushing as everyone else stared up at them briefly. Will stared down at the hollow and blanched further.

"Oh god.... they're sheep..." Will muttered, staring down at the bright spring grass and white torsos.

"What?"

"Bodies like sheep… he's… surrounded by…" Will shoved his hand into his bag, grabbed an airsick bag and lost the contents of his stomach. The fact that it was only toast and coffee did not comfort him.

"Will?"

"Jack. It'll be a classical myth or painting or both. The bird of prey was lured down by a bait bird of some sort, so that it would *land* on the shepherd. I don't think the bird exactly qualifies as a contaminant, it was needed to complete whatever picture he has. The torsos are the 'sheep' he's tending." Will managed, gesturing down into the hollow, stomach still sour

and jumping.

"What... He's recreating old pagan myths?" Jack asked quietly. "On Easter *Sunday* , does he think he's funny?" Jack demanded and Will sighed.

"No idea, it might not be deliberate timing."

Jack just glared, Will shrugged. It might *not* be. The Ripper didn't seem to be the sort to taunt like that, or at least, Will wasn't willing to say out loud that the Ripper enjoyed taunting Jack like that.

"How many corpses are down there?"

"Not counting the shepherd? Three or four. I *thought* I saw something else as I was walking down the hill, but I'm going to have to look again from the very top. And we might want to get the canopies up, Jack. Or we are going to be mobbed by carrion crows here. Let me take a look from the top again." Will suggested before he turned his back on Jack and climbed the hill, noticing that the dew had burned off while he was talking to the man with the eagle.

He looked again, watching the tents go up. He merely stood at the top of the hill, staring down. The glint of white in the tall green grass caught his eye again and he followed it down, carefully skirting around techs and held up a hand as an officer tried to step in front of him, running yellow scene tape.

"Wait, you might not have the right perimeter yet." Will said, walking by and carefully peering down. He sighed. A hand holding a heart was nestled in the grass. Just the hand, cut off at the wrist.

Will eased down to a crouch and waved a hand over his head, just staring. Something… something was *wrong* with the heart. But he didn't know exactly what.

"Buddy?"

"Do you have markers? I've got a hand and a heart right here. Only saw it because I was standing at the top of the hill and looking for out of place."

"What?" The cop spluttered. Will sighed and took a breath.

"Hey, Bev!"

"Yeah Will?"

"Your photos are gonna be out of order, I've got a heart and a hand over here. Hand looks to be male, caucasian presenting, bloodless, *neat* nails and holding a raw heart."

“Seriously, Graham?”

Will only nodded and Beverly came trotting over, holding both markers and a camera. Will backed off and trudged back up the hill, looking again. This time, the cop was watching him, so when he pointed, the officer went and raised his hand in the same way Will had prior. Beverly came over again.

“Will? How many of these are we going to find?” Jack asked, causing Will to startle badly. He glared.

“Three sheep, probably three hearts. So only one more. My instinct is saying behind our shepherd.” Will murmured, stomach going sour again. But he swallowed down his reaction.

“Will? Do I need to call Hannibal?”

Will merely shrugged and turned to stare back at the Shepherd, eyeing the offered heart, gaze distant.

~*~*~

It was only once they were back at Quantico that Will looked up in a daze, brain spinning with implications. Jack was looming, seeming nearly feral, as he waited and paced.

“I don’t *know* , Jack.” Will snapped, throwing up his hands, “I don’t *know* why he’s leaving hearts in hand right now, other than he wants to reinforce the message. Do we know which statue or painting this might be?”

“Guy holding a heart? Not really finding anything. And getting him on a gurney was a *bitch* , by the way. He’s in full rigor. So…” Zeller trailed off and shrugged.

“He was posed somewhere between six to twelve hours ago. Liver temperature will give you a better idea… do we have one?” Hannibal asked and everyone twitched and turned, Will startling violently.

“Eight hours in, when we found him, hello Doctor Lecter.”

“Ms. Katz. Jack called me, because you seemed… he said, out of it, WIll?” Americanisms always fell awkwardly from Hannibal's lips and this time was no different.

“I don’t recognize the pattern. Oh, it’s our Ripper, that’s dead certain, but… I’m not sure of the myth.” Will explained, waving a hand. He glanced up with a hopeful smile, “You’re better at that. Young guy kneeling, surrounded by torsos representing sheep, and the shepherd is holding his heart in his hands. Literally.”

Hannibal blinked and made a small considering noise, the way he did during therapy, which prompted Will to keep talking.

“He was... I wouldn’t call it gutted, but he’s got an incision from throat to groin and the heart is missing…” Will trailed off, his own fingers gesturing the path of the blade and then he shrugged, helplessly. “Also, an eagle landed on our shepherd and was eating the heart.”

Hannibal's eyebrows shot up abruptly and Will stared at him.

"You know that one..."

"The eagle is key, Will. It sounds decidedly Hellenic, Will, or possibly Roman- though for your purposes there is little to differentiate the two. You think the eagle was part of the scene deliberately?"

Will blinked.

"I think so, there was some kind of bait bird tied to it. Why?"

“Jack, I know you’ve commented on my painting of Leda and the Swan. Zeus took the form of a swan to seduce Leda. Their union led to... Some say the twins Castor and Pollux, hatched from the eggs, some say Helen of Troy was also born of it. Zeus was known to take the forms of animals to seduce potential conquests.”

“So Zeus and a guy, is what you are saying.” Zeller muttered typing something in. “Found it! Statue, Gane--”

“Ganymede and the Eagle.” Hannibal corrected, cringing at the pronunciation that Zeller managed to mangle before he’d even finished trying.

"Wait," Zeller muttered as he read the front page of the search engine. "Zeus carried him off to be his cupbearer, how is that romantic?"

“Carried off?” Will checked. Zeller nodded. “Offering himself up. Making himself vulnerable to his Deity? Same message as before.” Will muttered.

“But… that… suggests servile…” Price muttered. Will shrugged.

“So, the eagle was part of it. But he staged it to pull a gold eagle down. Used a pigeon to attract it. Horrified the person with the bird, by the way. Can I see an image, Zee?” Will asked. Zeller handed Will a tablet and he looked down at the image.

“This is… what year is this, Zee? Doesn’t look old enough.”

Hannibal leaned over his shoulder, peering at the image.

“Because it is not, Will. But the original would have been Greek, then a Roman copy, then handled during the Renaissance in painting more than statuary, and then this… a Danish Master, but it is almost modern by standard.”

“So… the Ripper is the one offering his heart. To… so he sees his Deity as an eagle for this one… have me, consume me… oh.”

"What's this one?"

“ *Ganymede Waters Zeus as an Eagle* by Bertel Thorvaldsen, it resides at his museum in Copenhagen.”

Zee looked up and seemed to stare at Hannibal without expression for several seconds.

Will nodded.

"I need... Where can I read that myth in English? Is there a book or...?" Will asked. "I need to get into this guy's head, and those myths are the way in."

"I have a passable translation of the text at home," Hannibal offered quietly.

Beverly walked by, glanced at the image and froze. “Um… Will? Would a miniature of that help?”

“What?”

“I have a miniature version of that statue, sitting on a shelf at home. If you need a three dimensional version, my sister gave it to me as a gift.”

"Your... You've got a sister?" Zeller demanded and Hannibal fixed him with a steady look.

"Zee!" Will barked. Zeller flinched.

"What?"

"She's in college. So back off before Bev decides to remove parts, also... *not cool* ." Will snapped.

"I didn't, I want, I wasn’t, just... You've never mentioned." Zeller mumbled apologetically.

"Katz... why do you have a birdy statue?"

"Because my sister thought it looked cool, and I like eagles. As Will knows. What was his last birthday gift to me?"

"A page out of a dictionary with a bird painted on it?" Zeller said. Price shook his head and Jack just growled dangerously.

"Katz, go get the bird. Lecter, go grab the book. I want this guy caught!!"

Bev shot an annoyed look at Jack and Will very much got the impression Hannibal wanted to.

"Hannibal?"

"I will retrieve it, along with another reference or two, since it will help you, Will. Someone mentioned multiple hearts?"

"He took the limbs, cleaned out the torsos... they look younger, fit, but he left the hearts and brought hands with him. They're all clean again too."

Will just stared at Jack for several seconds after Hannibal had walked away. “Jack, I know you want him caught, but… We have to figure out.. Well… the hearts. He kept repeating the same message. He’s offering himself to his Deity. Body and heart.”

“How does that help us?”

“Who are these people? Seemingly younger, headless… again for three of the four… and we won’t know if the hands left holding hearts belong to our torsos until after we dna match them.” Will sighed and rubbed his forehead tiredly, he wasn't sure how much more he could give Jack that he hadn't said already.

"What are you saying?"

"Nothing, nothing new anyway, that's the point. This guy is... These messages are really clear Jack, I don't know what else to tell you."

Jack dragged at his tie, loosening the knot. He sighed. “I… is there *anything* , Will?”

“He stuck to Deities this sounder. But he took a lot more meat. Even discounting the hearts he left behind, legs, arms, organ meat… that’s gonna be a pretty large stockpile, Jack.”

“Yeah. That’s what I was afraid of. All right fine, go get some rest, read those books of Hannibal's, bring me something I can work with."

"I've given you plenty," will snapped, "go find the person he's trying to impress."

"And... how the hell am I supposed to do that?" Jack snarled. Will just stared at Jack for several seconds.

"Sorry, Will. I just..."

"Yeah. We don't have much time left. And... nothing really added to the profile, other than the cannibalism."

"The Ripper doesn't even know who he's courting, how are we supposed to?" Price asked and Will sighed.

"There can't be that many people in Baltimore crazy enough to try to date a serial killing cannibal. That should narrow it down."

"To what? The inmates at the BSHCI?" Zeller asked.

Will just sighed, “Odd question, but the purple hat on his head… that color is bothering me…”

“Oh?” Price asked.

“Yeah… but… do we have long shots of our other two scenes?”

Zeller quickly dug out the wide angle photographs from the other previous two. Will tapped both photographs after a moment. “He tied them all together, blue strands that tied the bird were from scene two. The purple… the sisters said the Altar cloth was missing… he made sure to tie the scenes together. Worship, submission, offering.” Will murmured before he glanced over at Jack, “So… who is crazy enough to try to date a serial killer?”

"I don't want to imagine that it's anyone who is out there walking around free, Will." Jack said with a gesture to Zeller.

“And what’s that figure that’s thrown around... ‘how often does the average american walk by a murder and not know it?’ “ Will asked, shrugging slightly.

“Sixteen people, Will.” Beverly chimed from the doorway, setting down her tee shirt wrapped bundle. “Thank you.” Will said, nodding slightly, “So if the *average* person can walk by sixteen… it’s entirely likely there are at least a handful of people still loose and crazy enough to want to date a cannibalistic serial killer.”

“Huh, that’s still a concerning thought though.” Beverly said as Will stepped over to peer at the statue.

“Why in Baltimore though?” Zeller asked. Will shrugged.

“Doesn’t necessarily have to be Baltimore, could be the tri-state area. Gives a wider range, travel isn’t too bad.”

“Why are you *entertaining* this idea, Will?” Jack demanded.

“Find who he’s courting, find him?” Will shot back.

“So, we’re looking for a body builder between the ages of twenty five and early forties?” Price asked, frowning.

"Who said bodybuilder?" Will asked and Zeller shrugged.

"You said strong, I assumed..."

"Bodybuilders are aesthetic chasers, if the Ripper is moving corpses his body is built for work not looks." Bev said, shaking her head.

"No, I mean the person he's courting." Price clarified as he scooted across the floor on his stool to retrieve another print out and rolled back to his computer.

"I don't think the Ripper knows them, the variation is too much to be reflecting the person he's courting." Will said, tapping his pen idly against his notebook as he peered at the statue.

"You don't think... he still doesn't know who he's courting? At *this* stage?" Zee asked, seeming disturbed.

"No, I don't.” Will glanced up from scribbling a note, “I think this is the Ripper inviting his Deity to come to him."

"Who teases a *cannibal* and doesn't show their face?" Beverly huffed.

"Someone who knows he's a cannibal and isn't so stupid to show themselves until they know they'll get a positive reception?" Will asked, raising his eyebrows, “I mean… would *you* risk that? Either he likes you or you end up on a plate.”

"So wait... the person being courted... you are assuming they are seeing the messages?"

"Two words, Jack. *Tattle. Crime.* " Will just gestured to Beverly's screen and sighed. Jack made a noise and Will flinched at the sound.

"I'm going to..."

"She'll argue freedom of the press, Jack. You *know* that."

"Freedom of the press is going to get people *killed* ." Jack growled.

"Tough, you don't want her dragging constitutional lawyers into this." Will said. "And it's helpful to us right now. It's a certain pathology that follows TattleCrime Jack."

"Half this *lab* follows that trash site, Will."

"Half?" Will just glanced around at the raised voices.

"Zeller checks it on his lunch break, Price logs in with his morning coffee and yes I know what your current posting handle is, Price, but I also know you are working with Kapreski, so

that's above board. And I have an algorithm running so that I know if any of us are mentioned." Jack rattled off, stunning most of the group gathered around the tables.

"I mean *civilian* pathology Jack, most regular people don't want to know the gory details of violent crimes in their own zip code. Not in the way Lounds writes them."

"What does it say about my pathology, Will... that I follow *TattleCrime*?" Hannibal asked from the doorway, a cloth tote looped over his shoulder.

"You consult with the FBI, Doctor Lecter. That doesn't *entirely* make you a civilian." Will said with a slight shrug.

Hannibal paused, "I have followed *TattleCrime* much longer than that, Will?"

Will paused and looked him over.

"You're a psychiatrist, you're fascinated by the darkness in human minds."

Hannibal slipped the bag off his shoulder. "What brought us to this discussion, Will?"

"Tattle Crime has listed, with photographs, all three of our Ripper's latest sounder. So, the Deity has most likely seen them."

"Is that what we're calling them?" Hannibal asked with a raised eyebrow.

"It's what the Ripper calls them." Will answered.

"Oh?" Hannibal set the pair of volumes on the table, near the statue, taking a seat on a rolling stool to have a closer look at it, "How are you determining that?"

"Doctor Lecter, he's used a deity representative for each body. Zeus, Poseidon and..." Zeller paused and swallowed, "Um... who killed the Aeneid guy?"

"No one." Hannibal answered at the same time Will did.

"He fell in battle." Will finished, reaching for the first book and opening it to the helpful floral bookmark.

Hannibal sat up a little straighter, "According to Livy, he became a local deity after his body was never found." He offered quietly.

"So, one could argue, that Dido, the Triton, and our cupbearer here all had Deity involved, so the Ripper sees them as such."

"Aeneas drowned in a river," Will said quietly thinking of the sodden hillside of another case

"Will?"

"Nothing, ignore me, sometimes associations are just the mind finding connections where there aren't any."

"What is the theory you are working off, at the moment?"

"That the Deity saw each of the offerings that the Ripper left and the Ripper is inviting him to meet." Jack said.

"Definitely a *him* ?" Price asked and Will nodded.

"Definitely, or at least, the Ripper thinks it's another guy." Will said.

"Maybe check out the local gay bars then?" Zeller piped up.

"No, neither of them are the type to be going out on the town. They're *courting* ." Will shot back.

"They?" Jack pounced on the wording.

"I wouldn't expect the Ripper to continue a theme if he weren't seeing some positive reinforcement from his Deity."

"So he's getting some kind of contact from them? Like what?"

"Could be anything, letters, secret gifts, comments on *TattleCrime* articles about the Ripper..." Will shrugged. "They're communicating in a way that keeps the Deity hidden for now."

"So... you're telling me that the Deity and the Ripper are communicating. Great, just what I needed, two serial killers flirting with each other..."

"Looks like Jack,"

"Are we reduced to trawling *TattleCrime* comments then?" Zeller asked with a sneer.

"Could be. It's as reasonable an idea as any other." Will shrugged, distracted, as he stared down at the photograph of the crime scene. It would keep them busy and out of mischief at least.

Chapter Seven ~ April 5, 2010

Chapter Notes

NSFW Chapter ~ Smut

Hannibal sighed heavily as he entered his home, dropping his keys with a quiet thud. He had spent the day with Will and the techs going over everything as they had sorted through the evidence gleaned from ‘the Ganymede Case’ as Zeller was calling it now he had learned how to pronounce the name. Hannibal had buried his amusement as each hand and heart had gotten its own little tray, only one of which was sitting with the correct body. The calculations from the techs left him privately amused. They were estimating he had nearly two hundred pounds of meat. A smile at a day's work well done curved his lips before he went wire tense with a sharp intake of breath.

He could taste the mix of lavender soap and that awful aftershave Will always wore. The smile fell from his face as soon as the second scent registered. As he stepped into the foyer, he pulled the poker from it’s usual resting place by the fire without making a sound.

Will stood waiting in the kitchen. Hannibal took in the sight of him with both hands resting on the island, back to the door, clad in dark slacks and a white shirt.

"I knew you would be busy, Beautiful. Did you hunt enough?"

Finally . Hannibal closed his eyes for a moment to savor the realization that Will had revealed himself. Hannibal let his grip loosen on the poker until it fell to the floor with a resounding clang on the tiles that he hardly noticed, his shoulders immediately relaxing and heart rate rising ever so slightly as he processed the thought. It was exactly who he had been hoping it was in his darkest, deepest fantasies. It was Will. It had always *been* Will.

"I have absolutely no idea what you mean, Will." Hannibal murmured, easing up behind him.

"Of course not." Will agreed, shoulders loose. Hannibal scanned the room and realized that Will's gun was lying on the island, pointed away, but directly in front of Will.

"Will, is something the matter?" Hannibal asked, still feigning ignorance, just in case this was a setup.

"Have I proved myself, Hannibal?" Will turned his head and blinked once before he looked down at the weapon lying there, "Or do you have a request of me?"

"It is you who has been coming here, without your aftershave on."

"I couldn't make it too easy for you, Hannibal, and I had to be sure we understood each other."

"Understand?"

"Yes. If I have managed to offend or unsettle you, tell me to go. You won't have to worry about a referral or Jack. Well, you might have to worry about Jack, but he'd show up here trying to figure out why I'm not home.... but that would be all, Beautiful."

Hannibal just stared at the back of Will's neck. He could reach up and break it in an instant, and with a start he realised that they both knew it, that Will had placed himself in this position exactly for that reason.

"And you could tell Jack that somebody has been stalking you... throw him off track. He'll just see it as my having formed an... unhealthy attachment, which will make sense when he finds my car."

"Will?"

"Stop playing dumb, Hannibal, it doesn't suit you. Do you really think I've watched you all this time and don't know *everything* ?"

"And yet..." Hannibal watched as Will very deliberately moved in the kitchen, standing right over the secret entrance to the basement.

"If I was here to arrest you Hannibal, you'd already be in chains. I'm here because I thought we understood each other, your messages haven't exactly been subtle."

"No, they have not. Should I be worried that you left the gun?"

"There's one in the chamber, otherwise it's empty."

"One..."

"Call it insurance. I wasn't entirely sure how you'd react to me just being here."

"As if you have not been here as you please for months?" Hannibal asked with a small smile and Will had the decency to look embarrassed for a moment.

"I had to prove to you that you had an equal, it was either this or a full on fight... And I don't want to fight you Hannibal." Will offered with a shrug, they both knew that pound for pound, and despite the age difference, Will would not have fared well in a full on fight.

"No... what would you have done, if I told you to leave?"

"Asked for a kiss, bit you til you bled and then walked out of the house. I expect it would take Jack three days to become worried, another three to six to find what was left... why? If you want that..."

"You do not expect to leave here alive if I reject you..." Hannibal muttered more to himself than to Will. It was a dark thought, but not without objective merit.

"I know too much about you, you aren't going to risk me taking a rejection badly and turning you in. I'm not *stupid* , Hannibal."

"No, I didn't mean to suggest you were, my Admirer. But... you sound suicidal, Will. for obvious reasons this concerns me."

"I'm not suicidal, Hannibal, for the first time in my life I have clarity, and I know what I *want* . I'm putting my life in your hands." A pause hung between them for a moment before Hannibal gestured for Will to continue speaking, "I'd much rather you didn't kill me, but just in case you do, make sure you cook my liver well or you'll probably get a second hand hangover from the amount of alcohol in it."

Hannibal felt his lips twitch up in an amused smile.

"Will... what do you expect of me?" He asked, fixing the man with a serious expression.

"For you to be yourself, with space in your life for me, for us to see if we can date, publicly. I will wait, Hannibal."

"Will... I could be risking my medical license to openly date you so soon..." he offered quietly, lips turned downwards with annoyance at the thought. It wasn't that he particularly *cared* but the job was convenient for his lifestyle.

"You were never officially my shrink," Will interjected immediately, ignoring Hannibal's raised eyebrow at the insult to his profession, "Jack might get pissed but there's no legal case against you for dating me. I wouldn't put you in that position, Hannibal."

"Will..." Hannibal wasn't sure exactly why he was still arguing. This was everything he had been hoping for, offered without reserve, to know and be known in return.

"If you feel I need to see somebody, in that capacity, write me a referral. I'll go to whomever you send me to, and I will wait. I can be one more secret, Hannibal, if that's what you need me to be."

"Will... You sound almost... Desperate."

"I play chess in a world where most people struggle to grasp the rules of *Clue* . You walked into the room with a chessboard. So yeah. Just a bit."

"What do you want, from me, Beautiful?" Will asked, leaning back against the wall, Hannibal between him and his gun.

Hannibal looked him in the eyes, drinking him in.

"Honesty." He said eventually. "Tell me, why me."

"You saw me, Hannibal. *Me* , not whatever the social construct says I should be. You never flinched from my darker thoughts, but pulled me back to sanity when I went too deep. And you keep your own darkness carefully under wraps, hidden, even from those looking."

"And yet you saw."

"You let me see," Will said, voice soft, "you didn't hide from me. Everyone hides from me, but you."

"You are comfortable... with my diet?"

"Did you like my offerings?" Will asked.

Hannibal blinked at the sudden change in topic. "Yes? Were you trying to change my tastes?"

"Help muddy the waters, and… I didn't want you hunting in the snow, Beautiful. Too likely to hurt yourself."

"So..." Hannibal mused.

Will rushed to fill the silence, "I just wanted to make sure you had meat for the winter. You've been due a sounder but the snow kind of came early and out of nowhere this year. I wasn't trying to change anything."

"You stuck mainly to game meat."

"Cattle and sheep were easy to come by, and deer. Nobody ever thinks I hunt, Hannibal." Will smiled softly. "Sorry if some of the cuts weren't as.... pretty as you can make them."

"They were perfect, you are obviously a skilled huntsman."

"Not as skilled as you, but thank you."

"I was a surgeon Will, it is unfair to compare your skill to mine." Hannibal murmured, remaining where he stood, "You were careful only to offer what you knew I'd accept.... I did throw away your... first offering."

"It was steak, I expected the first one to be tossed, Hannibal."

"Oh."

"You would have been stupid to trust me that quickly. That's why I made sure to leave the second one wrapped. You're a lot of things but stupid definitely ain't one of them."

"You... expected..." Hannibal swallowed as Will pushed off the wall, telegraphing his moves clearly.

"Yes, may I..." Will stopped just out of arm's reach, fingers flexing in loose fists.

"May you... what are you asking me, Will?"

"May I touch you?"

Hannibal waited a beat to see if Will was serious before he let out a low breath.

"You may." He said quietly, watching to see what Will would do.

Will kept his moves obvious and slow, reaching first to glide his fingers from earlobes up along the jaw, fingers trembling.

Will bit his lip, swallowing sharply, stifling a low noise. Careful, calloused fingers grazed across his lips, thumbs smoothing up his cheekbones.

"Beautiful."

Hannibal didn't answer but the word made heat rise up his neck. Will had a power about him that made it seem like Hannibal was the only person in the world right now

Will drew a deep breath and carefully took a step back, dropping his hands. "Thank you."

Hannibal blinked slowly, and a frown pulled at his mouth, "Will?"

"Nothing more than you want to give, Beautiful."

"Nothing more than..." Hannibal trailed off and stared, "Will, you have watched me masturbate... why are you hesitant now?"

"Because... Well,"

"Words, Will. You can tell me anything." Hannibal murmured, lifting a hand and pausing in turn, "May I?"

"You can do whatever you like, Hannibal. You know I'm in your space now." Will responded. He leaned into the touch when Hannibal cupped at his neck and stepped forward, closing the distance again.

Hannibal leaned in and Will took a breath before Hannibal pressed a gentle kiss to Will's mouth.

Will responded almost automatically, glad he had the reflex because there was no way he could have consciously decided to kiss back.

Hannibal shuddered when Will's teeth grazed his lower lip, but didn't flinch as teeth nipped and tugged.

Hannibal leaned back, "Not sending you away. Shall I cook you dinner, you may help me with the salad?"

"Special treats for you tonight, Hannibal?"

"Do you want to share something special or are you content with more.... *mundane* fare, Will?"

Will licked his lips briefly and smiled. “You will never have to share your treats with me, Hannibal. I am entirely happy to eat what I hunt, and leave you your own trophies. But I will share mine, Beautiful.”

“Is that why you started declining meat, once I’d started hunting again?”

“It amuses you to make others unknowingly like you.” Will smiled and allowed himself to be ushered into the kitchen, “And I knew your supplies were still low. Was it really lamb in those pastries?”

Hannibal didn't answer for a moment but he fixed will With a knowing smile.

"Jack was very appreciative of them," he said eventually and Will snorted amusedly.

Hannibal moved around the island, fingers tracing over the knife block. Will gently nudged his gun more towards Hannibal and turned to wet a cloth so that he could wipe down the counter.

Hannibal just stared for several seconds, marveling at the trust. He picked up the gun, checked that the safety was engaged and tucked it into the back of his slacks before turning to the refrigerator.

Pausing as he took in the wealth of various brown wrapped packages, everything labeled in that familiar type face, he turned his head to eye his Admirer. “How about liver tonight?”

“If you like.” Will agreed, wiping down the island before moving to retrieve a pair of cutting boards.

“I am thinking of doing liver sautéed with bacon and radicchio over polenta with a salad to accompany?” Hannibal offered, plucking a package of meticulously labeled beef liver from the shelf.

Will nodded and glanced at the recipe cards as they were pulled out and offered for his perusal.

“I can make the grits, Hannibal. My Dad taught me how, using his Ma’s recipe.”

“Will?”

“This is a grits recipe, Hannibal. I can do this in my sleep… I did it when fever was chewing on my brain, literally. Do you have vegetable stock?”

"Of course, Will, in the fridge." Hannibal said nodding at the appliance. "I am fascinated how

entirely different cultures create such similar recipes sometimes. Necessity is the mother of invention." Hannibal mused as he offered Will an apron and donned his own.

Will rolled up his sleeves, slipped the apron on, and then washed his hands before he gathered his needed ingredients. He peered down at the cornmeal and frowned.

"Blue?"

Hannibal only smiled.

"Blue corn, seriously?"

"The only time I had blue grits... was at my Grandpa's funeral, Hannibal. Is this a celebration or..." Will merely looked at his cannibal and waited for the answer.

"Is there a symbology to it in America, Will?"

"Not... exactly? It's a family quirk. When my aunt passed, a cousin on that side showed up with blue grits. So, I don't associate it with... happy times?"

"Oh... I have yellow cornmeal in the cupboard if you prefer?"

Will swapped containers and hummed a soft tune as he mixed the polenta, switching spoons easily, watching the corn mush bubble cheerfully.

"I don't know the tune?"

"Something Mama Belle would hum as she made grits. I picked it up. Sorry."

"Don't apologize Will, your past is a part of you and I am eager to know everything about you, in your own time."

"I had a college roommate that got annoyed whenever I cooked like this." Will gestured to the polenta and then shrugged slightly.

"So you became used to apologizing. You need not, Will."

"Are you psychoanalysing me?"

Hannibal had the decency to look embarrassed, though whether it was because he had been caught or for actually doing it was up for debate.

"I'm joking Hannibal, I don't expect you to completely turn off how your brain works when I make my neuroses that obvious."

Will slid the polenta off to the side after tasting it, tucking a lid on top, so it would keep warm.

He then moved to preparing a simple salad from what Hannibal had set out, eyebrows winging up when he found pre-packaged croutons hiding in the pantry. He returned, holding

an individual serving bag.

"Yes?" Hannibal murmured, red eyes gleaming.

"I didn't think you allowed anything premade in this kitchen?"

"Oh really?"

"You got a reputation, Hannibal, and I've eaten at your table enough to know it's well deserved."

"These are... a guilty pleasure. I tend to snack on them plain."

"They would fit the salad?" Will offered. Hannibal nodded and began spooning polenta onto a pristine white plate before adding the bacon and radicchio and then carefully arranging the liver.

"So, are you going to tell me the answer to my question?" Will asked after a moment of silence and Hannibal looked up. "You get an entire side of beef and only take the offal?"

"Have you ever had the benefit of access to classical literature, Will?"

"In the American south where I grew up? Not unless it was on public tv."

"Ah, there is a tale of offal, presented so beautifully that even the greatest of the Greek gods chose it over the prime meat."

"Wait... I know that one. So you think you're Zeus?"

"I am not so egotistical, but only strive to make offerings that would attract the attention of such a being. As Prometheus did."

"So, you've got a God complex, just not the Juedo-Christian one?"

Hannibal smiled and finished dressing the plate with a flourish.

"Not quite, Will, my aim is presenting the meat to the people that they might be nourished from it."

"Wait... What?"

"Do not those who see my art learn from it? Will, there are more means of nourishment than food alone."

"Okay, that's the answer to build an insanity plea on, don't I deserve the truth?"

"Grits apparently are a comfort food for you, correct?" Hannibal asked. Will dipped his head once to show that Hannibal was right.

"There was a time in my life when meat was... scarce. The worst bits, as I have heard people call this... “ Hannibal gestured with his knife, “were all that was available. I grew to like the

taste."

"So it's familiarity. You know, all these years, so many people on your case? No one thought it might just be that. I should have realised. Grits filled my belly when there was nothing else. Those organs are your grits."

"How apt. Do you wish for wine?"

"Whichever you want to select, Beautiful. You've always had a taste for the right pairings."

"Something from the States then. I have a lovely Pinot Noir from Oregon, or a Merlot from California?"

"A merlot would be acceptable." Will agreed quietly as he set the salad down, breathing in the red wine vinaigrette and the sweet scent of the sautéed onions.

"Give me a moment?" Hannibal asked. Will nodded and watched his cannibal slip from the dining room.

Hannibal walked back into the room holding a bottle and two glasses.

"The merlot went... off, but I do have a Cabernet Sauvignon? It is from --"

" *Chateau Montelena* , the bottle I brought you?"

Hannibal nodded and a warm glow lit his eyes. "I saved it."

Will just stared at his cannibal, awed at the thought that the bottle of wine he had dropped off at Hannibal's dinner party and ran from, while his brain was slowly burning, Hannibal had *kept* it.

"You have an excellent eye for wine Will, this will pair perfectly and I think it befits this evening to share it. Don't you?"

Will managed a smile and a nod.

"I... If you think it will pair well, I know enough about wine to get by. Just like every other academic."

Will closed his eyes and savored the first bite of liver. “This is wonderful, Hannibal.”

Will opened his eyes to see the adoring look on Hannibal’s face and allowed a small smile to curve his lips.

“Did you mind the fact that the team started using the term ‘deity’ to refer to me?”

“I found it appropriate. You moved through my home, brought me gifts, and let me worship you from afar.”

“Have I been found wanting?” Will asked, but Hannibal heard the unspoken question.

“No, nor I would not presume to judge you, when you do not judge my habits.”

They ate and talked, Hannibal smiling with every sincere compliment that Will gave him and his cooking. Only once the salad had been consumed and Will was sipping at his second glass of wine did he allow his bright gaze to pin his host in place.

“Was the bouquet accurate in how Price interpreted it, Beautiful?”

“Yes. In all aspects, though… he never did interpret the fern. My last display for you disrupted his attention.”

“Was it important? For me to understand the entire message? From what I understood, you wanted to know me, with all your refinement and elegance, and wanted to offer yourself, in whatever capacity I would take?”

“Yes.” Hannibal agreed, flush showing along his cheeks. Will smiled softly.

“When did you figure out I was the one leaving you gifts?”

“I hoped it was you when I left the first of my sounder. You seemed… fascinated standing above the scene. I was more certain when I left you the second offering.”

“That… ah… that was pretty damn explicit, Hannibal. It threw me a bit, to see how sexual that scene was.”

Hannibal tilted his head slightly, “Did I discomfort you, Will?”

“No, it just stirred up the entire lab and made Jimmy *really* question if you didn’t find the bodies sexually attractive in one form or another. I had to walk out of the lab on several occasions to lock myself in that little bathroom right off the lab and laugh.”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow but smiled smugly, “I am glad I could also provide an amusement, Will.”

"So, I have to ask... why did you choose that figure for the Neptune? I'm nowhere near that...." Will gestured to the empty air.

"Stylistic choice, my Deity." Hannibal murmured, "I wanted it obvious to the right person that I am overwhelmed."

"I," Will choked out almost nervously, "I overwhelmed you?"

“Yes.” Hannibal took a sip of his wine and merely watched as Will straightened a bit further in his seat.

"I have a serious question though."

"Oh?"

"The positions of those bodies... Were you insinuating what Zeller thought you were insinuating or were you just screwing with anyone else who might have been watching?"

"Are you asking if I prefer to be sexually dominated and passive with those who have the appendages to do so, Will?"

Will's blush deepend.

"Yes." He said through slightly gritted teeth. A pause hung between them.

"Yes. Is that a problem?" Hannibal's eyes flashed for a moment, otherwise seeming unbothered as he waited for Will's answer.

"No, not in the slightest, but it's hardly the kind of question I would usually ask over dinner."

"Of course it isn't, one presumes that had you planned the date you would at least wait until dessert to ask something that presumptive."

"Yeah..." Will said. "Though, knowing if you're compatible with your date before dessert also has its benefits."

Will watched as Hannibal seemed to preen at the compliment in small motions, chin tipping down slightly as pink stained his throat. "Though, I have no intention of rushing, or putting any pressure on you, Hannibal."

"Thank you, Will. Allow me to clear the dishes?"

"May I assist?" Will asked. Hannibal nodded and they worked in tandem in the kitchen, slipping plates into hot soapy water and the knives and forks into a small bucket of the same. Will tucked himself into a corner and watched as Hannibal went to the refrigerator and pulled something covered with a silver lid from the very top shelf.

"Would you carry this out? I will bring the plates and the cognac."

"Of course." Will stepped over and took the cold dish from Hannibal. He blinked when Hannibal leaned over whatever it was and pressed a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth before pulling back.

Will walked into the dining room, listening to Hannibal approach behind him. The knowledge that Hannibal was armed didn't make him nervous. He had made his peace with whatever outcome this night might have in store or him. He set the container on the table and moved to his side again, blinking as Hannibal set a pair of plates, a pair of glasses, and a bottle of cognac down.

Hannibal pulled off the domed lid and split the layered confection before sliding it onto two

plates before he set down the cutlery and opened the cognac. Will didn't immediately recognize the brand.

"Tiramisu and a *Remy Martin* cognac, Will. Enjoy."

Will took a bite and sighed at the rich taste of coffee.

"This is wonderful."

"Thank you. The cognac compliments it well." Hannibal encouraged, glancing away from Will and swallowing a sip, fingers twirling the stem of the glass.

"Are you nervous, *Darlin'* ?"

Hannibal glanced up and then returned his gaze to the spirit. A blush stained his cheeks. "I…"

Hannibal glanced up again at Will and then turned back to his dessert as he tried to pretend he wasn't still blushing. Will just watched, a small smile curving his lips. "I'm perfectly content to let you set the boundaries and limits, Hannibal. We move as fast as you are comfortable, Beautiful."

"Perhaps, if we were a little more... open with each other, some of the awkwardness of this encounter would evaporate and we might be able to enjoy the Cognac without relying on it as a social lubricant?" Hannibal suggested quietly as the firelight gleamed in his eyes and Will blinked, surprised.

"This is all about you, Hannibal, I'm moving at your pace." Will said just as quietly with a small gesture of a toast in Hannibal's direction before he sipped his drink. "Besides which... you can't expect me to go steamrolling into a conversation about intimacies with a man who kills people for being rude to him, can you?"

"So, you recognized that part of my… design, Will?"

"I did. It took me several weeks of back-tracing during your previous sounder… and I will admit to there being at least two bodies I'm not sure belong to your score card or not… however, the one thing they all had in common was being highly rude to *everyone* they encountered."

Hannibal paused over his drink for a moment and fixed Will with a curious look.

"Did you have a favorite?"

"I did quite enjoy talking to the son of the homophobic insurance doctor, very polite young man, he and his boyfriend were very good at pretending they weren't relieved he was dead." Will answered with a quiet smirk.

"Oh yes, he was... a personal case."

"Dare I ask what he did?"

"He dared insinuate that I might lie for cheaper health insurance after making his assumptions based on my age and mannerisms."

Will winced theatrically.

"That'll do it.” he agreed before asking, “He had an issue with your mannerisms?" eyebrows rising before he cut a taste of the rich dessert with his fork and savored it, watching Hannibal's reaction.

"I think he took some issue with my choice of suit, and deemed me... somewhat effeminate." Hannibal said with a slight smirk. "Which alone, I would have simply called excellent deduction."

Will nodded slightly, there had to be more to it.

"But to then insinuate that I might be diseased and *worse* , that I would think to lie about such a thing--" He hissed out the words and Will's grip tightened imperceptibly on his glass.

"So... that one was yours." Will murmured rolling the glass carefully between his palms before setting it down on the table. "Did you enjoy consuming him?"

Hannibal smirked and dipped his head.

"Your suits are... perfect for you. You are European, Hannibal. Some knuckle dragging insurance salesman... who doesn't take into account where you come from..." Will trailed off and shook his head.

"He offended you?"

"He insulted you. You are... meticulous. A bit... fussy in how you dress, but I find it sweet. And listening to Jack bitch about the bills for your clothes... amuses me."

"At least he now informs me when I may need hiking boots or other equipment."

"If you still want help picking out a set of hiking boots... I should be free this weekend, I mean, with our resident terror having gone silent again..." Will teased quietly.

Hannibal made an amused sound and agreed quietly.

"I would certainly appreciate the expertise of a practiced outdoorsman." He paused for a second, eyes sparkling with mischief. "You are not perchance in the market for new dress shoes, that I might return the favor?"

Will let out a quiet chuckle.

"When I am, I'll definitely call you, I wouldn't know where to start." His gaze turned amused, the blue brightening, "Considering that one scene, you ended up in ankle deep mud and still somehow managed to pull your foot out, with your shoe still on."

"And then Mr. Zeller unfortunately overbalanced..." Hannibal murmured. Will chuckled.

"His face planted in the mud, Hannibal."

"Then he ought to have invested in better fitting shoes." Hannibal muttered.

"His shoes fit," Will shot back, "he's just a bit of a klutz, poor guy."

"And we are drifting again, Will. Yes, rude tends to offend me. However, I am inviting you to talk to me about intimate details, to see if we are further compatible."

"Such as?" Will asked, nudging his plate aside. Hannibal let his eyes glide down Will's throat as he swallowed.

"Such as, I do not mind a partner taking a dominant role... some of the time."

"Some of the time?" Will echoed, blush soaking down his throat, blue eyes going a touch wide.

"I don't expect a partner to... do all the work, and any previous partners I had were... pleased with me."

Will blinked rapidly. Hannibal's speech patterns were difficult to follow with so much alcohol in his system and they were both a little more in their home accents than usual, which didn't particularly help.

"I... think we may have very different ideas about what constitutes doing all the work and taking the risks in sex, Hannibal."

"As long as we are both aware of the risks and enthusiastically agree to whatever is being done with or to the other person... is there a problem?"

Will set his drink down thoughtfully.

"I have... made it a rule in my life," He said slowly, "Generally," he added pointedly, "not to be penetrated." He forced out, then added in a rush, "I had a bad experience in college, he wasn't exactly careful and it put me off..." He trailed off helplessly, he hadn't really meant to just unload the old trauma on Hannibal like that

"Not all bisexual or homosexual males enjoy penetration, Will. If you are not comfortable with the idea of it, then it need not be brought up again."

"Hannibal... you're not serious?" Will asked, shocked.

"Why should I not be?"

"Well, most guys, I don't tend to last long with guys, Hannibal, they don't tend to like when I don't... reciprocate."

"I do not follow."

" *Look* , I don't know your opinion on it, but the average, red blooded American male only tends to bottom if he thinks he's going to get to top later..." Will said bluntly. "And then he goes nuts and walks out when he realises that when I said I don't bottom, that didn't mean maybe he could convince me."

"I am not American, Will. And most of the *guys* , to borrow your term, have not been comfortable in their own skins to respect your preferences. Do you enjoy touches or oral affections, or should I make a note to avoid..." Hannibal trailed off and sipped at his drink, watching as Will seemed to flinch as though struck.

"I'm not... no, I like affection, I'm not *that* fragile." he answered, tone a touch too harsh with feeling. "I just..." He gestured vaguely. "If it's going to be a problem for you, if you're going to need what I can't give you." Will said pointedly.

"You have had this conversation before."

"I've been *lied* to in this conversation before too, I really want this one to work, Hannibal, so I'm asking you to be really honest with me right now."

"As you can probably tell from your perusal of my bedside table, and your previous observations of me... I enjoy penetration."

Something tight in Will's chest seemed to loosen at that, there was no hesitation in Hannibal, no sense of withheld information now.

"Do you believe me, Will?"

"I believe you believe what you're saying." Will said slowly. "And I respect you enough to know you're not the type to lie to yourself like that."

"Do you mind being pinned, Will?"

Will's eyes narrowed, "How?"

"Would it upset you if, while we were both intimately involved, I were to pin you to a bed, on your back and then straddle you, to use you for my own enjoyment... the way you've watched me do with a toy?"

"I..." Will bit out an awkward cough. "Never tried it, I'm definitely not adverse." He answered swiftly. "It's not the positions, it's the penetration. Aside from a couple of old injuries," he rolled his shoulder tellingly "rotator cuff," he added by way of explanation, "I'm reasonably flexible."

"You have indicated that you are not comfortable being penetrated. I am not asking to do that, Will." Hannibal assured, "It is just... you know who I am... the thought of my pinning you does not... spark worry or fear?"

"If you wanted me dead, Hannibal, I'd already be dead and probably on a plate. You are talking about... playing with me, in a sexual sense."

"I am."

Will paused for a moment, seeming to be sizing Hannibal up, considering if he wanted to say something so inflammatory as the thought in his head out loud.

"You should probably know too..." He said. "I don't worry about you killing me," The words came slowly but without force, "because I'd rather be here and dead than alive anywhere you aren't."

Hannibal blinked once. "Are there any other things you absolutely do not enjoy in a sexual sense, Will?"

"Not that I know of... Depends on what you're into to be honest."

"Will, I do not expect you to simply acquiesce to my demands."

"I don't... it's not like that. The way my mind works, If you're happy, I'm happy."

"The reflection." Hannibal murmured, before his dark gaze became intense, "Hmm. Do you drown in your partner's pleasure?"

"Sometimes. So, what you described there... I'd probably really enjoy it, and not just because of the reflection."

"Do you mind listing what you liked with previous partners?"

Will flushed and took a shaky sip of cognac. Hannibal leaned forward and topped up the glass. Will laughed quietly.

"I… I like *contact* , Hannibal… probably more than sex itself. Don't misunderstand, please. I *like* sex, but being able to hold a partner while they catch their breath, before they run to the bathroom to clean up…" Will trailed off and swallowed. "If sex is part of how I get contact… that's fine, enjoyable too, but…"

"You are on the asexual spectrum?"

"I'm not sex repulsed or anything I just..." Will sighed heavily, explaining that his primary motivation wasn't sex always seemed to leave him tongue tied. "I'm a cuddler. I like having someone warm to curl up with and hold."

"Would you like to move to the study?" Hannibal asked. Will frowned slightly but nodded. Hannibal started to clear the plates, so Will helped, both leaving their glasses of cognac on the table.

Hannibal reached out a hand, once the plates were in the sink. Will went still, gaze wary.

“I think we will be more comfortable in the study, Will. Please bring the bottle if you like.”

Will followed, moving down the hall and slipping into Hannibal’s study, looking around the room, but smiling at the charcoal pencils and sketch book placed just so at the corner of the desk.

“I have been enjoying them, Will. Thank you. Would you sit beside me?” Hannibal asked as he gestured towards a deep green sofa.

Will perched and Hannibal held out a hand. “Do you only prefer to cuddle after sex, or would more frequent contact help soothe you?”

Will opened his mouth and then closed it, blinking. “You… you’re offering?”

“To let you curl up and hold me? Yes.”

"I... M-" he cut off abruptly and snorted. "sorry, you're going to hear the words "but most guys..." Come out of my mouth a lot tonight, I think."

“And I will remind you, as frequently as you need, Will, I am not *most guys* .” Hannibal said as he shifted slightly and turned, until he was leaned against Will, face pressed into Will’s throat, breathing in a mix of lavender and that awful cologne. Will’s arm wrapped around his shoulders, even as his breathing hitched and then released in a shaky chuckle.

"I'm... I feel like you're being so accommodating and I'm just..."

"Will, I assure you, I am perfectly content with the things you are saying, otherwise I would say so. On which note, I *insist* you let me choose a new aftershave for you."

That worked a laugh out of Will. “You really don’t like it?”

“No. Though, I wonder why you maintained the lavender soap.”

“Even after the lab switched, you mean? It was a mistake order at Quantico, was switched pretty quickly, but I may or may not have filled a jug with that soap, so that you’d know it was the same person moving through your home. I kept it in the barn.”

"You relied heavily on my sense of smell." Hannibal nuzzled at his throat.

"You can pick my aftershave out in a room of ten people, I didn't have a choice in the matter. If you wanted me dead, I would be, Hannibal. I'm not worried about you biting me... unless you like that?"

"A little, but not to draw blood," Hannibal murmured and Will nosed into his hair absently and squeezed him in a light hug. Hannibal purred in response and Will smiled.

"Like being held and petted, got it." He said quietly and Hannibal chuckled with a self aware smirk.

"I did tell you."

Will's hand slid down Hannibal's arm and ended up in Hannibal's lap. The back of his hand brushed Hannibal's groin and he blinked.

"Will, I am content with nothing more than this, if that is all you want tonight."

"Um…"

"Merely a natural reaction to being near you, Will." Hannibal murmured before pressing another kiss to his neck.

Will made a soft, pleased sound before his hand paused on Hannibal's belt. "Is this okay?"

"Yes, Will. More than." Hannibal agreed. Will shifted slightly and Hannibal felt muscles tense before he was suddenly shifted and laid on his back. Hannibal only blinked and looked up at Will, head tilting slightly.

"You are beautiful when you do that, cock your head to try and figure me out. I think that *these* have become uncomfortable for you, and I don't want that. May I touch you?"

"Of course." Hannibal agreed. Will's fingers were quick to unbuckle his belt and then go for the trousers below that, button and zip sliding down. Hannibal swallowed back a noise as he felt himself slip through the flap in his silk boxers.

"See? That feels better, doesn't it?"

Hannibal made a pleased sound and then Will's fingers curled around him, sliding downward once before gliding back up.

"How about we make you more comfortable, Beautiful?"

Hannibal actually blushed and Will fixed him with a soft smile.

"Will?" Hannibal reached out and gently trailed a hand along Will's cheek.

Will smiled down at him. "You are okay, I want to watch you come apart first. And I know you are clean, and I know you know I am… you weren't exactly subtle about checking my records after we ended up dealing with the Rose Killer."

"You… checked?"

“Mmhm. Made sense. This is only an appetizer, Hannibal. Do… do you want a barrier?”

"Unless you have had a different partner since your last test, I would prefer not to. if that is all right with you?"

“I’ve been too busy watching you sleep, Beautiful, and I’ve managed to avoid any of the situations that demand a new test.” Will said, slipping off the sofa and going to his knees. Hannibal sat up again and blinked. Will on his knees seemed… counter to everything Will had discussed, yet somehow *right* .

Rough yet gentle hands eased down trousers and boxers. Hannibal kept himself from squirming against the upholstery as it came into contact with his skin, and he allowed Will to pull off his trousers and underwear, along with his socks.

Will rested his hands on Hannibal’s thighs and quirked an amused smile before he wrapped a hand around the base of Hannibal’s erection and bent forward.

Hannibal hissed and sank his fingers into the cushions on either side of where he sat, not having expected such an enthusiastic response from the man kneeling at his feet.

“Will!”

Will eased back and peered up at Hannibal through his lowered lashes, mouth wet and red. “Yes, Beautiful?”

“While I am greatly enjoying your oral attentions… I would much rather…” Hannibal nibbled on his lip and blushed, suddenly unsure what to say.

“Hannibal, I want to taste you. That’s exactly what I’m going for. I’m not expecting you to last, appetizer, not main course, Darlin’.”

Hannibal moaned as Will returned to his cock, fingers burrowing into those dark curls, head falling back, but being very careful not to arch into the scorching mouth wrapped hungrily around his cock.

The press of Will’s tongue and the careful suck of his lips knifed through Hannibal, ripping his orgasm from him. He gasped and listened to Will’s muffled moan of pleasure as he swallowed. Hannibal’s fingers clenched in his soft hair and he panted, riding out the aftershocks.

Will leaned back on his haunches and smiled, licking a sheen from his lips. Hannibal just stared, knowing he was a disheveled mess, but his Deity somehow looked perfect with his mouth red and wet.

“Did you enjoy that?”

Hannibal swallowed, “Yes. May I…”

“Anything you want, Beautiful.” Will said. Hannibal gave himself a moment to assess his balance before he pushed to his feet and held a hand out. Will took it and came to his feet.

Hannibal led Will through the house and up the stairs to the second floor. He pulled his Deity into his bedroom and then turned to face him, hands rising to caress his shoulders, strong fingers smoothing over warm white cotton.

“May I undress you?”

“Only if I can help you get out of the rest of your clothes.” Will countered. Hannibal nodded.

Fingers slipped open buttons, pushing gently and then draping the waistcoat over the back of a chair before peeling off Hannibal’s shirt. It landed on top of the waistcoat.

Will let his gaze rake down Hannibal’s exposed body, frowning slightly at a bruise high on his side.

“Ganymede had a surprisingly good punch, but I managed to contain most of it.” Hannibal explained with a sharp smile. Will traced the bruise with his eyes, fingers curled into fists. “Will, if the prey were easy…”

“It would be boring.” Will murmured as Hannibal pushed his clothing to the floor, following slacks and boxers down, falling to his knees. Hannibal looked up and the gleam in his eyes was… predatory. It made Will suck in a shaking breath.

"Are you certain, Will?"

"Yeah," Will breathed, "yeah," he said more forcefully, "I er... Beautiful."

Will coughed awkwardly. "You're beautiful."

Hannibal smiled and then leaned forward. He licked carefully, familiarizing himself with the feel and texture on his tongue. He let his eyes close and licked again before opening his mouth. He suckled and savored the weight, easing Will down his throat, gasping briefly as his gag reflex tried to rise. He ruthlessly suppressed it and swallowed.

Will groaned and trembled. Hannibal swallowed again, sliding back and then pressing forward again. He shivered as he felt Will’s hands as they traced up his shoulders and one hand cupped the back of his neck.

“God, Darlin’. Not too much of that, now.”

Hannibal eased back and let his eyebrows rise in query.

“I thought you wanted me pinned on your bed, Hannibal.” Will’s smile is dark and it made Hannibal swallow around his mouthful. Hannibal pulled back, pressing into the warm hand at his neck.

“Is that what you want tonight, Will?”

Will closed his eyes in the same manner he had at a scene, seeming to reach inside himself. “That… that’s not what *you* want, Beautiful. You wanna be taken apart.” Will murmured, opening his eyes to stare down at Hannibal, still kneeling at his feet.

Hannibal allowed himself to smile, mouth holding too many teeth, too pleased. He sucked a shuddering breath when the hand on the back of his neck tightened, but he obeyed the silent command, rising to his feet and Will’s mouth plundered his, teeth stinging gently at his bottom lip, tongue swiping at and soothing the small hurt.

“Do you want to watch me, Darlin’? Or…” Will smiled, somehow soft even with that hot light in his gaze.

"Have me Will," Hannibal murmured against his lips, wicked grin pressed between their mouths, "however you like."

Will gently turned Hannibal loose and followed him onto the bed, watching with bated breath as the older man gave him his back and crawled onto the bed, arching his hips suggestively.

Hot hands settled onto Hannibal’s hips, fingers tightening as Will joined him on the bed. He shivered as rough hands traced up his thighs, fingers brushing softly, following the lines of his muscles before shifting and Will’s hands cupped his ass as he moved up the bed to whisper in Hannibal’s ear.

“Lube still in the normal place, Beautiful?”

Hannibal nodded, he was already beginning to pant softly.

"You stay right there, sweetheart," Will whispered, he dropped a light kiss on Hannibal's lips and nosed at his cheek lightly before raising himself up, reaching out, and pulling open the bedside drawer. He felt around without looking, not wanting to take his eyes off of Hannibal until his fingers closed around the familiar shaped bottle.

Will pressed kisses to Hannibal’s back as he slicked his fingers and carefully flipped the cap closed again. Hannibal shifted when a finger grazed through his cleft. “Don’t wanna hurt you… god, you’re tight. Not gonna rush you, Beautiful. Fuck you feel good.”

Hannibal shifted again as the finger was removed from inside of him, more lube was added, and the finger was reintroduced. *He* wasn’t this careful with himself… Will, it seemed, was taking his time. Hannibal clamped a hand over his mouth as the finger slipped out again.

“I like to hear you, Hannibal, go ahead. Want more already? Or should I be a bit rougher?”

Hannibal shuddered and dipped his head. Soft lips skimmed his back, and a hand anchored at his hip. He swallowed. Will hovered at his back, just waiting.

Hannibal let out a quiet, high pitched whine and Will watched, and then he saw it, the flash of

eagerness beyond the nervousness of this being their first time together.

Listening to the click of the cap, he twitched as the cool liquid was spread across his entrance with careful strokes. He sucked in a breath as two were introduced and then *crooked* in just the right way.

Hannibal bit his lip as his back arched entirely of its own accord, but knew most of the noise came out anyway. He shuddered as Will did that again and again before the fingers were withdrawn and a third joined. “Will…”

“Don’t wanna hurt you, Darlin’. Just want you a bit more loose, not much… but… god you’re beautiful shaking apart like this.”

“Will… please.” Hannibal managed before biting down on his lip. He went down when Will’s fingers pressed lightly between his shoulders. The smooth press of Will’s cock against his entrance had him moaning before Will even moved. Slick fingers clutched his hip and then the feel of being too full registered.

“God… Hannibal. Just let me know when you are ready for me to move, Darlin’.” Will breathed, plastered against his back, yet arms braced next to his shoulders, so that Hannibal didn’t feel Will’s weight, just the heat of his body and the press of skin against skin.

Hannibal took his time, just savoring the feel of skin, heat, and fullness for a few seconds before he turned his head. Hannibal paused for a deep breath and nodded slightly, smile spreading across his lips.

A whimper slipped his controls when Will shifted, the slight loss of contact registering painfully sharp, but then the press of Will into him obliterated the realization. Fingers clutched at the back of his neck and Hannibal groaned and closed his eyes.

“Will…”

Will’s pace increased and Hannibal shuddered and let his hands flex in the sheets, body burning with the sensation, skin feeling all of a sudden too small as the pressure and pleasure built and built.

“Gorgeous, that’s it, that’s it… Just let go, Beautiful.”

For a second, Hannibal was certain his heart stopped, he forgot how to breathe, and then the hot rush and breathless sweet sting of Will’s teeth in his shoulder bloomed in his consciousness. He gasped and shuddered, brain once more registering sensation and the slick, wet heat dripping from him.

“Just lay still for me, Darlin’. I’ll get you cleaned up.”

"...Will..." He felt the fluttering of a touch on his shoulder and heard Will chuckle quietly.

"You passed out for a second there, just take it easy."

Hannibal blinked as Will straightened his legs for him and helped him more or less fall onto his side. A soft press of lips became a hungry kiss on Hannibal's part, chasing any *hint* of blood. He pulled back when he found none and blinked in confusion… he'd thought…

Hannibal listened to Will move around his darkened bedroom with ease and sighed, jumping slightly at the feel of soft, hot, damp terry cloth gently wiping him down. When he moved away, disposing of the cloth into the hamper, Hannibal made a small pleased noise.

"What do you want, Beautiful?"

"I was led to believe there would be cuddles?" Hannibal responded, peering into the darkness. Will moved back towards him and paused at the edge of the bed.

"If that's what you want?"

"It is." Hannibal held out a hand and smiled as Will crawled under the duvet with him and gathered him close. Rough fingers carded into his hair as he shifted slightly so that he was lying with his head resting on Will's chest, listening to the thrum of his heart.

"You, dear Will," Hannibal breathed, "are an utter marvel," he whispered, pressing his face into Will's chest lightly.

Epilogue ~ April 6th, 2010

Will woke up to his clothes gone from the floor and presumably spinning their way through Hannibal's laundry room, which led to him borrowing a silk robe before descending the stairs to the kitchen and the smell of freshly brewed coffee. Hannibal was already there, fully dressed, with coffee poured and homophobe served up for breakfast with scrambled duck eggs, toast, and a blackberry jam from the closest neighbor.

Will just smiled at the sight of Hannibal once more clad in slacks, shirt, and a waistcoat with an immaculate apron over it all, humming some bit of opera as he cooked. But when he stepped from behind the island, Will stared for a second. Hannibal was wearing scruffy slippers and not actual shoes, and somehow that rendered the entire scene utterly adorable.

"A good breakfast is most important to start the day, don't you think, Will?" Hannibal asked, noting absently that Will was staring and smirking at his feet.

"But... purple, fake leather?"

"They were a gift from Alana." Hannibal explained. "It was a... secret santa gift. There was also a lovely bottle of wine, but these were included along with an apron."

"Ah... And you keep them?"

"They are incredibly hard wearing, and never failed to raise a smile with my then-housemates. Much like you." Hannibal offered.

"Familiar then?"

"Quite so. And strangely comfortable. I can also pull my foot out of them if I spill something on them or drop a knife."

“Well, that makes sense.”

"Shall we? It is a simple protein scramble, because I felt we would need our energy."

"Special scramble?"

"A particularly phobic pig. Unfortunately this is the last of that bacon I have." Will paused and glanced between the plates, Hannibal nudged one closer to Will's fingers, "Your plate is the market bacon you left me before I started hunting again, Will."

"You don't have to separate out my meals, if you don't want to, Hannibal, not if it's more work for you."

“You will be aware if you are eating something special, Will, you have my word.”

“I will consider myself forewarned from here on out then?” Will teased softly. Hannibal smiled.

“Should I expect random stores of meat to continue?”

“For the next time you have Jack over for dinner? That may be wise.” Will said before he picked up his plate and his coffee, pressed a kiss to Hannibal’s cheek and walked out of the kitchen to wait for him in the dining room. Hannibal only stared after him in fond bemusement.

End Notes

Well, this is HK's first foray into Hannibal.

I completely blame Mx. Hissy for this!! :p

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